Speak of the Devil (and He Shall Rise)
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Speak of the Devil (and He Shall Rise)

by hayloftown

Summary

Greyson has always found athletes annoying, and yet, here he is, stuck with the ever present headache that is his roommate's best friends: the Brown Bear's football team. His very pet peeves in the shape of a person; Greyson wonders if he will survive the school year.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson has spent his entire life thinking athletes were self centered assholes with the brain capacity of a goldfish and the emotional intelligence of a brick.

He's not entirely wrong, either.

He's sure that some athletes aren't an absolute nuisance. He's aware of a handful of people who happen to play sports who don't make him sick with their outlandish personalities. But, for the most part: it takes a certain kind of person to willingly shove each other around on a field for hours at a time, only to stand naked with the same people in the locker room afterwards.

Greyson understands the jock-crowd all too well. He's seen it up close and personal. His older brother, Wesley, was a big rugby fanatic (and thus, Greyson was bullied into enjoying and playing the sport, too). In fact, Greyson played just about every sport. Football, rugby, hockey, swimming, track and field– most of them didn't stick for much longer than a season. Even if he was good at it, he didn't enjoy it. The only sport he could tolerate was tennis and volleyball, both of which he was really good at. He stopped playing volleyball after a knee injury as a teenager, but tennis stuck around.

His teammates are better than the average jock, though. Maybe it's because they're not the "jock" type. They are civil in their games, and they don't hurl discriminatory slurs around for the hell of it, and they don't smell like cheep booze and dirty socks.

So, for someone who hates the sports crowd, he sure as hell finds himself amongst them a little too frequently.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to at least *pretend* to like my friends," Rowan huffs as he drops his stuff in a heap on the floor. Greyson looks between the pile of dirty clothes and Rowan expectantly. "Don't look at me like that. I'm tired."

"So am I. And there is a hamper immediately to your left," Greyson says back simply before looking back down at his textbook, highlighter in hand. "Why would I lie to your friends?"

“Pretending and lying are different,” Rowan insists.

“They quite literally are not,” Greyson sighs, watching as Rowan begrudgingly picks up his dirty laundry and deposits it in the hamper mere inches from where he left it. “Was that so hard?”

“You are the absolute worst, and I hate rooming with you,” Rowan huffs, flopping down on his bed directly across from Greyson’s. “I should have just rushed with Cameron.”

“And yet you didn’t,” Greyson mutters, running the marker over a line of text about the infra-red light in space. “You’re welcome to move out at any point, though.”

“And give you the satisfaction? Hell no,” Rowan scoffs. “You can’t get rid of me.”

Greyson doesn’t acknowledge the comment and trains his attention on the book in front of him. Rowan doesn’t pester him for the next few minutes– Greyson considers getting him an award for what may be the longest period of silence from his roommate. A full 60 seconds without being annoying is an accomplishment.

It’s promptly ruined by a phone call.

“Hello?” Rowan greets, and proceeds to dive into what feels like the longest conversation of all time.

In all honesty, Greyson *doesn’t* hate Rowan. In fact: he is possibly the only football-player Greyson could tolerate, both American and internationally. Even that was a stretch sometimes. For the most part, Rowan isn’t all that bad. He’s a little loud and can be rowdy, but Greyson can be too when he’s with the right crowds. His primary flaws come with his friends, who seemingly brainwash what was a fairly decent human being into becoming a mindless zombie-jock who only thinks about the next party and getting laid.

Even in terms of messes, Rowan isn’t all that bad. His primary flaw is laundry, but it is a hassle to get to the laundry room, so Greyson can’t blame him for that, either. What he can blame Rowan for is the way he so easily blends in with people like the ones he plays with– burly, gross, obnoxious and rude. In Greyson’s personal (and very correct) opinion, some of the worst would be the “big three” of the football team, also known as Rowan’s main friends: Bryce Preston, Aiden Leech, and Cameron Cunningham.

Greyson thinks, while university is very, very different from high school– far fewer "cliques" and less of a popularity contest, some of these guys clearly never grew out of their high school mindset. They win one game in their senior year and suddenly act like they won the superbowl. Even if they did win the superbowl– Greyson wouldn't care. *Congrats, you can catch a ball. Good for you* . Almost everyone enrolled in greek life seemingly are still living out their high school glory days and walk the college campus with their noses turned up as if they were still the classic teenage bully, when, quite honestly, nobody cares anymore.

So, when Rowan is on phone calls like this, with who Greyson just knows is Cameron, Greyson wants to vomit in his mouth a little.

"Just kiss or something already, christ," Greyson murmurs under his breath, shaking his head and turning the page.

"Just say you have no friends and get over it," Rowan shot back, running a hand through his hair. Greyson rolls his eyes and snaps the book closed, standing. "You headed out?"

"Yes. Because I actually do my homework, and it is rather difficult with a caveman barking in my ear."

"Buzz kill."

"Fuck off."

Greyson shuts the door behind him, trudging his way down the hall and knocking on the first door he sees. A bleary-eyed Santiago answers the door, staring him down emotionlessly before huffing and stepping out of the way.

"You insist that he's not a douchebag, but I swear, you stay in my dorm more than your own," Santiago mutters, running his hands over his face and falling back onto his bed. Greyson kicks the door shut and drops his studying materials on the empty and slumps into the chair.

"Because he isn't the problem. His friends annoy me. Even the idea of them makes me want to die," Greyson says back, letting his book fall open again. "Rowan is a mild annoyance."

"You're a mild annoyance," Santiago says back, pulling a pillow over his head. "Shut up and study. I'm sleeping."

"Shut up and sleep. I'm studying," Greyson says back before falling

silent, and letting his friend drift into slumber.

Greyson, unlike Rowan's prediction, has plenty of friends, from all different backgrounds. He doesn't need all his friends to be in the same sport as him, or for them to be involved in the same activities. He is more than content with being friends with various people who are unlike himself– Santiago, who is less athletic and more interested in foreign affairs and legal politics, and Luca, who is both interested in sports but also puts on a good show for some video games. Some of the tennis kids– both from the unisex and mens teams he plays for. He's friends with the volleyball club-sport kids (but none of the team players). He's friends with the DND crew, and the football (soccer, he supposes) kids, and he's friends with a lot of the nerdy kids from his classes.

Funnily enough, Greyson thinks the only crew he can't seem to get along with are Rowan's football buddies.

Because here he sits in his friend's dorm, unbothered by Santiago's presence, and more than content with the life he has.

He sticks around for a few hours, until Santiago's roommate, Luca, gets home, and Greyson excuses himself with a salute and ducking out the door, their usual exchange.

By the time he arrives back at his dorm, it is to an open door and a filled room, heavy with drunken laughter and bro-ish interactions that give Greyson a migraine before he's even stepped into the room.

Nope. Not today.

He turns on his heel to walk in the opposite direction– surely one of his teammates has a spot on their couch he can crash on for the night– when someone calls out.

"Yo, England, you stickin' around or not?"

Greyson stops short, taking a small breath. He turns back around to face the big three, the treacherous three, glaring at Rowan, who was sitting behind Aiden. Rowan sends back an apologetic smile.

"Not," Greyson deadpans before going to walk away again.

"Don't be a prude. What, you're something like… I dunno, 28 now? Drink a little. Loosen up. Try to not be a loser and talk to people," Bryce teases, leaning against Greyson's doorway. *23* , Greyson thinks

to himself. “We’re not playing spin the bottle with you, though.”

“Yeah, I’m leaving,” Greyson says simply, only for Bryce to snag his wrist and tug him into the room. Greyson’s shoulders freeze up, and he stumbles in their direction, scowling. Rowan moves to his feet.

“Guys, chill,” Rowan sighs, stepping between Bryce and Greyson. “Let us have one good night, please?”

“Tell your boyfriend to take a joke for once,” Bryce scoffs, stepping backwards and sitting on Greyson’s bed. “Hell, maybe you need to, too.”

Greyson glowers at Rowan, then down at the floor, at the small area rug between their two beds, at the shoes kicked off and the jacket hung from Greyson’s bedpost, another on Greyson’s chair, his pillow on the floor, his sheets messed up from heathens sitting on his bed. His heart stammers in his chest, and he is filled with dread. He needs to wash his sheets. He wants to disinfect the entire room, top to bottom.

“Alright. Night’s over. Y’all are killing the vibe by being assholes. Get out,” Rowan declares.

“Oh boo-fucking-hoo . You’re a grown man taking orders from your roommate like you’re his wife,” Bryce groans, but stands, dramatically bowing at Greyson before walking past. Aiden bumps his shoulder in passing. They glance over their shoulder at Cameron, who sat quietly to the side, wordless. “C’mon, idiot. Rowan chose new friends.”

“Goodnight,” Rowan says, waving as the other two walk down the hall. “I’ll talk to you later, man.” This second comment is directed at Cameron, who was standing and carefully reorganizing his mess, nodding once.

“See you in class tomorrow.”

Greyson watches as Cameron shuts the door behind him, running a hand over his face.

“Christ…” Greyson puffs out. “I don’t want to be a dick, but… c’mon, man…”

“I know, I know,” Rowan sighs, dropping onto his bed. “They’re not all bad. Sometimes they suck but… I don’t know-”

“What do you mean they aren’t all bad?” Greyson groans, going to his bed and stripping the top cover to replace it with a different one, tossing it in his hamper. “It’s *them* . I don’t think I’ve ever had a pleasant interaction with those meat-heads.”

“Maybe that’s because you call them meat-heads and never have a good interaction back,” Rowan suggests. Greyson shot a glare at him. “I’m not saying you need to be their best friend, but… I dunno. Maybe meet them on their level.”

“Stupid, brusque, and slobs. Will do,” Greyson mutters, glancing at the end of his bed, where Cameron’s jacket was abandoned. He grits his teeth. He pinches the collar like it was diseased and deposits it on Rowan’s desk chair. It’s his problem now.

“Greyson,” Rowan groans.

“What do you mean *meet them on their level* ?” Greyson finally asks, louder than intended, and certainly more dramatic than necessary. “They’re rude! They have no concept of personal space. They don’t clean up after themselves. They treat our friends like shit-”

“They treat our friends the way they treat everyone. And maybe that’s not your humor, but it’s not ill intended-”

“I don’t believe you, funnily enough,” Greyson huffs, sinking down at his desk and glaring at the pile of fabric on Rowan’s. “Everything they say feels like it’s meant to be mean, and I didn’t come all this way just to be pushed around by theatrical bullies again.”

“In their defense, you don’t come off very sunshine and rainbows yourself,” Rowan shrugs. “I know it’s a defense mechanism or whatever, but they don’t. Like you said– they are stupid dudes, how on Earth are they supposed to read your mind? They can barely wash their laundry without assistance and you think they understand human emotion?”

“I’d think they had empathy, yes,” Greyson sighs. “Maybe I have higher standards than you do in friends.”

Rowan takes a breath, as if he was planning to rebut the statement, but nothing follows. He doesn’t argue. He doesn’t make a case for himself, and doesn’t try to insist any longer that his friends are some kind-hearted, soft, blankety warmth. Because it’s no use. His friends aren’t kind. They aren’t soft. They aren’t warm. They are dicks, and Rowan is somehow lonely enough to let them act like it.

“Shut up and go to bed, idiot,” Rowan mutters before tossing over. Greyson rolls his eyes and goes back to studying in silence, sure to turn off all the lights aside from his desk lamp.

The night is silent from there on, with no sound other than Rowan’s tossing and turning, and Greyson flipping the pages. The latter doesn’t go to bed until late– his mind is too busy with trying to retain the qualities of his textbook, and lost in the possibilities of being friendly with who he considers to be the worst people in the world.

He would quite literally rather hang out with his high school bullies than make friends with Rowan’s football buddies, but unfortunately, his best friend is right. Greyson isn’t entirely kind, either, and there is no benefit to feuding like school children.

He looks at that jacket, though, so easily discarded without a thought to pick up after himself. Greyson is already coming out of his own skin at the idea of the places those three had been before they stormed his dorm room, before they touched his stuff and sat on his bed. He wants to take a shower just thinking about it.

It’s only the first week, and Greyson already can’t wait for it to be over.

Chapter End Notes

WELL WELL WELL

so, big kudos to graciegirl2001, who is a major inspiration for this fic :) i read all is fair in love and football and decided i needed to give a football au another shot, maybe this time a little less angsty than When....

If this is my first fic you've read from me: Hi! I'm Hayl, I write a lot. I've done a few other bigger pieces, and I suggest checking them out. Otherwise, keep an eye on my twitter @ hayloftown for updates on, well, everything.

Thanks :)
- hayl

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

If looks could kill...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In Cameron's humble opinion, Rowan is quite possibly one of the kindest people he has ever met.

There are several factors to account for in this opinion (though, it feels like a fact). Too many factors to list them all. But to rattle off some basic reasons:

He doesn't believe he has ever seen the man genuinely hateful. Aggressive, absolutely. Loud, too. But he is not someone made of hate. Cameron recognizes his best friend by his laughter and a little bit by his volume. He is loud, but he is sweet.

Another reason is his open mindedness. It takes a lot to bother him. Rowan is good at keeping his horizons broad, at seeing a bigger picture than the one painted before him. The world isn't black and white for him, but a spectrum, a variety of life, and he is the last person to judge where someone is on said spectrum.

And finally: because Rowan puts up with Greyson's bullshit. It takes a really nice person to deal with someone who is such a negative pain in the ass.

Cameron spends all his energy on not snapping at the British annoyance every time he makes his presence known. There is something about his holier-than-thou attitude that grinds Cameron's gears. Cameron knows he isn't a saint, but he is thanking God himself for not making him as annoying as that weird little rat dog that follows on Rowan's heels.

Cameron isn't nearly as bad as his friends are– Bryce and Aiden can be pretty douchey, too, but they aren't as annoying about it as Greyson is. Bryce and Aiden are the type of guys to roll their eyes and make shitty jokes. Greyson is the type of guy who would interrupt their conversation in an effort to "correct" them, only to say something blatantly stupid. He likes to be the center of attention at all times, and

it's infuriating.

Cameron will be the first to admit he isn't perfect, and neither is Bryce, or Aiden, or even Rowan. But he finds solace in knowing he isn't Greyson.

Speak of the devil, and he will appear. That feels like his entire past year of college, in all honesty. Dreading to see Greyson, only to immediately get stuck with him.

Cameron has been spending his evening hiding on the back porch to avoid his ever-present headache. If he thought Greyson was bad, having Greyson, Bryce, and Aiden under the same roof is a death sentence. At least, Cameron wants to die, as he is plagued with both Greyson's voice and Bryce and Aiden's bitchy, ignorant, and bigoted remarks all at the same time. He was rather content sitting in the house with some of his football friends and their friends. Then the bickering began between Greyson and Bryce. Cameron was probably one of the first to get up and walk away.

"You seem miserable," Rowan says, the screen door clattering shut behind him as he sank onto the stair beside Cameron. "Would you believe me if I said Greyson didn't start it?"

"Not for a second," Cameron scoffs, swirling his drink around in his cup with a crinkled nose. He's been taking slow sips, but God he hates the taste. He's never been much of a drinker. "I think he gets off on starting fights."

"Starting them, no," Rowan shrugs. "But winning them, definitely." Cameron rolls his eyes. "Seriously. It wasn't him. I think… I think fuckin' Liam said something about-"

"Why do you defend him?" Cameron asks back before Rowan can get too carried away with a defense on Greyson's behalf. "He's a pain in the ass. He's obnoxious. He likes the sound of his own voice-"

"The same reason I defend your sorry ass," Rowan interrupts before Cameron could continue. "Because I spend a little more time with you than others, so I know you're *not* an asshole. I spend every single day with Greyson. If you had even a slight foundation on who he is, you would feel insanely guilty for half the shit you say about him."

"I doubt that," Cameron huffs. "There is very little about a person that could excuse them for being that annoying."

“Amazingly enough, he thinks the exact same thing about you,” Rowan states, standing again. He moves off the step to stand directly in front of Cameron. “I’m not out here to listen to you bitch about my friend. I don’t let him talk shit about you, I don’t let you talk shit about him. Grow the fuck up, man.”

Cameron scowls down at his cup, letting the liquid spin into swirls of glittery adulthood. He runs a hand through his hair and over his face, then glances over his shoulder at the screen door where sound seeps out of. He wonders if the argument has fizzled out yet.

“I don’t know what I gotta fuckin’ do to make you guys stop hating each other. Because honestly? If you tried, you’d get along,” Rowan continues. “Unfortunately, though, he is under the impression that all jocks are assholes, and you’re under the impression that he’s a stuck up Brit. Try stepping out of that box you put yourself in and maybe you’d have more friends than just me.”

“You say this shit to him too?” Cameron asks back, raising the solo cup to his lip and holding his breath as he gulps. Despite all his mixing, the rum still sits at the top of the cup.

“Yes, in fact. Because I’m not two-faced.”

Cameron glances up at Rowan, making a brief eye contact. His best friend is looking at him expectantly.

“I’m not making friends with him today.”

“Jesus-”

“I have a migraine from hell and Bryce put me in a shit mood. Maybe another day,” Cameron says back. “I’m only gonna try if he tries, though.”

“Fine! I don’t- I don’t care! I just want my friends to be able to sit in the same room as each other.”

Cameron stands and bumps Rowan’s shoulder playfully before walking past him to toss the remainder of his cup. They return inside together, and Cameron is pleased to find a house lacking in whining and bitching. He carries himself to the kitchen and allocates himself back with the football guys, who were carrying on with a conversation like nothing happened. Cameron looked over his shoulder for Rowan, but he was walking away, looking around every corner.

Looking for Greyson.

Rowan may be kind, and he may be genuine, and he may be good , but God is he an asskisser. Cameron thinks Rowan's fatal flaw will be his need to chase after someone who doesn't want to be chased, his need to fix things. To bridge the gaps no matter how wide, no matter how decrepit the path may end up being. Rowan just wants to dip his hands into everything and everyone, and it will bite him eventually.

But Cameron doesn't say that to him. That's Rowan's problem. If he wants to suck Greyson off to make him feel better, so be it. Cameron isn't going to get involved in someone else's mess out of moral instinct. Rowan learned it from watching his parents– make things work, no matter how damaged it may be.

Cameron learned, too. Stay out of the wreckage, lest you get cut.

When Cameron returns inside to the crowd, the guys are talking about the game coming up on Sunday– first of the season. They have it in the bag, undoubtedly. Their old quarterback graduated last year, and good riddance to him. Not only was he a controlling asshole, but he also sucked at the sport as a whole. His throws almost always missed the mark, and his last season was… painful, to say the least. The only reason he got the spot was because he filled for the old QB, who dropped out after a knee injury. And this year, they have Bryce, who is a bigger asshole, but at least he can handle the ball without fumbling over his own feet.

There's also locker room banter shifting from person to person– crude comments about their "bucket list" this season. Cameron has always hated these type of discussions. He doesn't need to know the sex life of his team mates, especially not the "list" of people they are hoping to get with at some point before the final game. Most of the girls on their list are easy– cheer team girls, or neighboring sororities, with the occasional girl that is playing "hard to get". Cameron stays strategically quiet when the list is brought up, and it saves him from the trouble of having to admit that he doesn't make lists. It's predatory, and creepy, and lowkey sounds like something a serial killer would do.

Rowan walks in right as it's about to be Cameron's turn to speak. Saved by the bell.

"Did you see where Greyson went?" Rowan sighs.

"Hopefully back to London," Aiden mutters under his breath, earning

some laughs. “No. I’m not his babysitter.”

“Is he still here, at least?” Rowan asks back.

“Why does it matter?” Bryce groans, hooking an arm around Rowan’s shoulder and giving the younger a good jostle. “Get in here and have a damn drink. Stop fussing over your boyfriend and have fun.”

“I was having plenty of fun until Liam decided to be an asshole to my roommate,” Rowan says, craning out of the hold. “Did he leave or stay?”

“Would you stay after that?” Liam scoffs, pouring a drink for Rowan and pushing it toward him. “He left. And he hopefully won’t come back if either of you have the fuckin’ braincells left to not bring him with you next time.”

Rowan grits his teeth. Cameron stays quiet.

“After what, Liam?” Rowan asks. Liam shrugs, then gestures to the reem of cups again, a drink of his own still in his hand. Rowan and Cameron see it at the same time– a set of bruised knuckles, partnered with a smug smile on Liam’s face. “Jesus Christ– you’re all unbelievable.”

They watch Rowan turn and walk out, the front door slamming behind him. Cameron grimaces, and shrinks back further.

The rest of the party is significantly more tense with Rowan’s absence. No matter the teasing, the pestering, the annoyance, Rowan pulls the team together. Keeps them in line. It’s hard to have fun without him, knowing that he is the one person who can be friends with everyone and anyone he wants to. He makes conversations feel light. He makes rooms feel warm. He makes parties feel fun.

Instead, Cameron is surrounded by his friends who feel like strangers, even after all these years. Bryce, Aiden, and Liam keep bitching about Greyson, keep mentioning how funny it was to see the look on his face when Liam threw the first punch. The rest of the team keep quiet to avoid being the next victim. Cameron shares eye contact with a linebacker– Sam– who provides a sad smile and looks down at his beer. Bryce, Aiden, and Liam dominate the conversation, and the rest of them let the night move on like that. Uncomfortable, nervous, and sore.

Cameron goes to his room that night silently, and regretting rushing

for Greek Life, as he is now stuck in the same house as Bryce, Aiden, and Liam. He sat in his bed, head propped against the wall and his eyes shut. He wonders what would even lead Liam to make that kind of decision. He wonders why everyone is so calm about it. He wonders if he's next.

Maybe he doesn't like Greyson, but he doesn't want him to be hurt.

He texts Rowan.

***Cameron** : Is he okay?*

Consider it an olive branch. Consider it the foundations to the bridge Rowan insists upon building. They won't be friends. Cameron doesn't think he's capable of being Greyson's friend. But he can be civil. He can be better than his teammates.

Rowan doesn't respond. Cameron stares at the text thread for a little too long, watching him type then delete his response. Eventually, Cameron is simply left on read. He frowns and turns his phone off, glancing over at his roommate Sam on the opposite end of the same room.

"You think we're too mean to Greyson?" Cameron asks in a whisper. Sam stays quiet. "Like, yeah, he drives me fucking crazy, but-but… I don't know. It feels like it's going too far."

"I know," Sam murmurs back. "But I don't think… I don't think that's an us thing, right? I mean… we aren't doing it. We're not… y'know."

"Yeah," Cameron exhales, staring up at the ceiling again.

It's not him.

Cameron never wanted to be that guy. The one who hurts others. The one who goes along with the crowd. And yet, here he is. He has this awful feeling that he was already in too deep, he was already too involved with the fist that threw the first punch. It may not be his hand, but it was his friend. His housemate.

He sends Rowan another text.

***Cameron** : i'm sorry about tonight. lmk if I can do anything to make it up to either of you.*

"Do you?" Sam finally asks back. Cameron bites his cheek. "Think

we're mean?"

"Yeah," Cameron exhales shakily. "Yeah. I do."

Sam nods, sinking back in his chair and staring forward at his wall with a blank stare.

Sam was there when it happened— Greyson was walking away already. He was trying to get out of the argument. He was trying to be better. He had raised his hands and stepped away, trying to walk out civilly. His back was turned. Liam had grabbed the collar of his shirt, yanked him back, and punched him square in the mouth.

Cameron was outside still. Rowan too. Greyson was doomed in there. He didn't bother hitting back, he knew it wasn't wise. He was more concerned with getting the hell out of there. He was outnumbered, one of him to what looked like a hundred frat brothers and football boys. He wasn't fucking around with fate. Not today.

Sam was there, wondering where the Hell Rowan was, because he could always clean up their messes. He always reeled everyone in. He always kept it civil. Greyson would silence himself, and the football guys would back down out of respect for their mutual friend.

Rowan texts back, finally.

***Rowan** : I hate this damn team.*

There it is.

That four letter word Cameron was so sure Rowan was incapable of feeling. Hate. Anger, sure. Aggression, absolutely. But hate is strong. Hate is a small word carrying a big meaning. Hate isn't as simple as dislike, as annoyance. Hate is a burden. Hate is a responsibility.

Rowan doesn't bother indulging, and Cameron doesn't bother pressing for more information. If he wanted to talk, he would.

Cameron goes to bed that night heavy with guilt and sticky with resentment. He doesn't like this feeling– being responsible for problems he didn't cause. He is far from the reason Greyson got hurt, and yet, he feels like it's partly his fault. He tries to appease himself by thinking that, maybe, just maybe, it isn't that bad.

The gym the next morning is dead.

Maybe it's because half of the university is sleeping off their hangovers, and maybe it's because it's a Saturday morning, and nobody wakes up before noon on Saturdays, but Cameron walks in to find even the front desk understaffed. He shuffles through with his bag slung over his shoulder, avoiding eye contact as he goes. He is not in the mood for a conversation with anyone– he just wants to get his workout in and go to the library, maybe go out with some of the guys if they sober up long enough to become bearable.

He drops his stuff at the lockers, pulling out his phone and tucking some earbuds in his ears. He shot Rowan a text–

***Cameron** : @ the gym. U coming?*

He stuffs his things into a locker and pulls out his water bottle, turning to face the floor of the gym. He lets out a heavy sigh, frowning. He's not sure where to start today. It's so empty, and almost everything is free to use, with only a few treadmills, ellipticals, and a single squat rack taken.

Cameron shuffles to a bench and yawns, plopping down his phone and water before heading toward the dumbbells. He tests their weight individually. He's physically exhausted from moving back in over the past few days, he's not entirely sure he can do his normal full weight. His hand grasps a 75 lbs dumbbell, only for someone else to be reaching for the second one of the set. Cameron releases it immediately and steps away.

"Sorry-" they both say simultaneously, the other person also backing away.

"Go 'head."

They both look up, and Cameron stifles a gasp.

Greyson stands across from him, an overwhelming bruise on his jaw and a small split to his lower lip. Greyson's face falls, and he averts his eyes to the weight-rack.

"You going or am I?" Greyson asks with bitterness in his tone.

"What happened with the…" Cameron asks without thinking. He knows what happened. He regrets asking the moment the words leave his mouth. Greyson rolls his eyes, reaching for a 60 lbs weight set instead.

“Does it matter?” Greyson huffs. “Don’t pretend to give a shit. It’s weird. Have the 75’s.”

Cameron lets Greyson walk away, and tries to brush it off, tries to ignore him entirely. It’s painfully awkward, though, given that they are some of the only people in the gym, and are sitting not too far from one another. They’re both facing the mirror on the wall, both watching their own forms with a sparing glance to the other through their reflection. Awkward eye contact ensues. Cameron considers leaving. He also considered smashing his head through the mirror so he didn’t have to look.

Cameron turns up the volume in his headphones– some stupid song downloaded by Bryce during one of the hundred times Cameron has given the drunken man a ride home. He’s not typically a fan of the intense, more vulgar sounding music that stems from soundcloud white-boy rappers. Every once in a while he’ll enjoy something upbeat, and he has nothing against the entire genre of rap, but… needless to say, Bryce is not a beacon for music taste. He hits skip and lets the very swift tone-change calm him down.

Call him crazy– he prefers calmer music. Stuff that makes his brain tingle, and his muscles relax. Maybe it’s from 16 years of piano lessons, and maybe it’s because he spent the majority of his high school years being drowned out by aggressively loud music– who cares. All he knows is that he thrives in peace and tranquility, despite what someone might see on his outer shell.

His eyes keep straying to his right. He just keeps thinking of the discoloration on Greyson’s cheek, and the cut at the corner of his mouth. Cameron isn’t innocent from wanting to hit him, but he’d never actually go through with it.

It feels like one of those “on the wrong side of history” moments. Knowing he was treading a thread, leaning to one side– about to get caught falling to his doom. About to get caught doing something, being someone, he shouldn’t.

Cameron is far less lonely on the benches within thirty minutes of getting there. More and more of the fraternities wake from their drunken slumber. Rowan is first to join them, and first to ease any tension, by acting like nothing was wrong– making conversation to the both of them like they’ve always been friends. School work, parties, and football games– Rowan talks to them in circles as an effort to distract them from their discomfort.

“Are you coming to the game tomorrow?” Rowan asks his roommate with an easy going smile. Greyson doesn’t even try to hide his disgust. “Gotcha. No worries. I will force you to celebrate my win afterwards.”

“I’m not going out partying with you,” Greyson scoffs.

“Did I say we were partying?” Rowan asks, delivering the same attitude back. “No. We will find something significantly more interesting than sitting around with drunken narcissists. And my friend Cameron is more than welcome to join us.” Rowan says this last part with a pointed look at Cameron. It takes lots of restraint to not bark out a laugh.

For the first time, Cameron thinks he was on the same page as Greyson, because they both shot their mutual friend a glare. *If looks could kill* .

“I’m sure he’s got better things to do. Lord knows ‘ Delta Phi’ is known for their parties…” Greyson mutters. Cameron grits his teeth. He’s at a crossroads– does he agree with Greyson (*barf*) or does he argue and insist he’s got nothing good to do, and get stuck with Greyson (*mega-barf*). Greyson is looking at him though, expectantly, awaiting his response. It’s like he can read Cameron’s mind, because the motherfucker smirks at the sight of Cameron’s hesitance, at his uncertainty. “C’mon. You know you wanna hang out with the brothers, or whatever bullshit you guys call yourselves. It’s your whole thing. Throw a rager and be an asshole.”

“Greyson,” Rowan says with a warning tone.

“No, no, he’s right,” Cameron reassures, holding a hand out to defuse his best friend. “I would much rather hang out with people I consider family than someone who is asking to get punched in the mouth.”

“Will you two cut it out?” Rowan spits, smacking Cameron’s shoulder. Cameron rolls his eyes and looks away. “I don’t ask very much of you. I’m not even asking you to be friendly with each other. All I ask– all I *beg* you to do, is be good enough friends with me to tolerate being around each other. Because I refuse to pick favorites. I’m not just choosing between you two.”

“Ro,” Cameron exhales. “You chose him the second you put his name down to dorm with. I’m sorry, but no-can-do. I’d rather stick with the asshole brothers than your needy-girlfriend of a roommate.”

With that, Cameron stands, and parts ways with him. In good time,

too, because he watches Bryce, Liam, and Aiden filter in through the main entrance as he walks away. If he gets away from Rowan, if he gets away from both of them, maybe it will keep Greyson from getting hit again. Maybe it will save himself the drama of Rowan's misery for his roommate.

He's welcomed to the group with bro-hugs and fist bumps. Like always, like every time he walks into the house, he puts up his front of confidence, of cockiness, of pride and spirit that categorizes him as a douche. So be it. He'd rather be a douche than whatever the fuck Greyson was.

Chapter End Notes

I finished writing and editting this whilst at work because i couldn't stop thinking about writing this stupid end bit. So, here, you heathens.

These doofuses are very entertaining to write. I'm having fun. I hope you are too. Happy almost-friday :)

until next time,
-hayl :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

To add insult to injury...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson stays true to his word and doesn't go to the game.

In his defense– it's an away game. He's not interested in driving over an hour away for a stupid football game, especially not if he has to be stuck in a car with football fanatics. That sounds like his own personal hell, and he's not sure what sounds worse– the drive, or the game itself, where he would be crammed into dirty, uncomfortable seating, sitting too close to a neighbor who shouts in his ear and spills soda in his lap.

No thanks.

Rowan is out of the dorm early that morning– the team has to meet the coach bus at 7AM sharp, and he had plans to get breakfast with the team before the drive, so he was out of the room by 5:30AM. Greyson has never been so happy to wake up to a silent dorm.

To be a good roommate, though, he does turn on the game on his laptop. He cracks open the dingy Dell computer and loads the stream up, letting it play in the background as he cleans. Not much is happening for a while– just the set up and the commentators discussing how the game might go. Last time Brown faced Harvard, they lost catastrophically.

His friends eventually join him in the room, too– Santiago takes over Rowan's desk to study Luca sits on the floor and helps Greyson fold some laundry.

"I can't believe you're actually watching that garbage," Santiago snickers, glancing at Greyson's laptop.

"I'm not watching. Just listening," Greyson shrugs, glancing up at the screen as the teams start to flood the field. "I don't even know what half of it means."

“It’s actually really easy when you pay attention. Kind of interesting sometimes…” Luca shrugs. Greyson and Santiago both send him a weird look. “Don’t start.”

“You’re defending the enemy,” Santiago accuses. “Who’s side are you on?”

“They aren’t the *enemy* . You’re so dramatic,” Luca rolls his eyes. “They’re just some dudes in tight uniforms pushing each other around. I’m not a fan but it can be amusing.”

“It’s okay Luca. You can admit that you think they’re hot,” Santiago teases before looking back down at his textbook, then to his laptop. Luca balls up a pair of socks and throws them, clunking Santiago in the head. Greyson shakes his head and persists with his folding expedition.

“I have eyes. Of course they’re pretty. But I also grew up kind of caring about sports unlike you losers.” He shifts where he sat, squinting at the screen. “What uniform are we again?”

“So much for paying attention,” Greyson snorts.

“You are just as colorblind as I am,” Luca reminds before returning to his folding duties.

“We are the team with the white pants, which are a pain in the ass to clean dirt and blood out of, I’ll have you know,” Greyson mumbles, shaking his head. There’s a beat of silence. Greyson feels the pressure of attention resting on his shoulders. He glances over to find both of them looking at him. “Don’t start.”

“You do his laundry? You’re such a good housewife,” Santiago jokes. Greyson shakes his head with a scowl. “How much does he pay you? I’ll double it if you do mine too. Or- Luca! Luca, c’mon, man-“

“He doesn’t pay me, I would just rather do the laundry than have it sit on my floor all week,” Greyson says with a small huff. “I help him with some chores, he keeps his friends out of my hair, it’s a good trade off.”

“You think if I do his homework he’ll hook me up with one of them?” Luca hums next. Greyson nudges the man with his foot. “Can you blame me for trying?”

“Yes. Your standards are in Hell if you’d settle for one of them,”

Greyson says back. “Don’t fold my towels. You do them weird.”

“You do everything weird.”

They’re losing.

Not by much, but enough.

They’re in a sour mood, and not without good reason. A couple bad calls from the refs who were clearly biased and some even worse plays from Bryce has them currently sitting at a 14-21 standstill. They haven’t budged in a while from the 40 yard line.

Cameron pours some water in his mouth and steps out of the group for a moment to clear his head and not listen to Bryce bitch about how “nobody listens to me”. Newsflash, dickwad: they listened, and your plan sucked.

Cameron caught Rowan’s eye— he’s sitting on the bench, stretching out his knees and glaring at an empty field.

“You good?” He murmurs. Rowan glances up, then away. “You pissed at me?”

“Usually I am, who’s surprised?” Rowan mutters, turning and twisting in an effort to crack his back and stretch his core. Cameron is quiet for a moment, waiting for him to continue. He doesn’t.

“Are you gonna tell me why? Or is this like when my parents put me in time out and tell me to think about what I did?”

“Why is it so difficult for you to just try to get along with my friends?” Rowan finally unloads. Cameron’s shoulders drop, and he rolls his eyes, turning to pace away. “It’s Greyson. It’s not like he’s gonna-“

“All he does is run his mouth and make snarky comments about why I’m a douchebag! I’ve done nothing to him other than give him the same energy back,” Cameron defends. “ *I* wasn’t the one who hit him. I’m not like the guys that he hates so badly. I’m stuck with them, so I have to like them, but other than that… I don’t know! He’s a dick first, I will be a dick back.”

“You took it too far yesterday,” Rowan murmurs.

“He called me an asshole! That was what he said. He started it!” Cameron insists with a small stomp. “I’m not making a saint out of

myself, but you know me, Ro. You know both of us. I hold a mirror up to his actions and let him decide what reflects back."

"Sure," Rowan huffs, standing and walking back to the group. Cameron shakes his head.

The play starts again. Cameron is racing the far field, hand out in the sky to signal he's open. He loves this feeling. Even if he didn't plan on pursuing football for forever, even if going to Brown was more about an Ivy League education than it was sports, he must admit: this is a highlight. His feet and his heart thumping in synchronization. His lungs exploding with energy. His brain sparkling with ideas.

He sees Bryce looking. He makes eye contact from across the field. The ball soars from his fingertips. It's hurtling through the air. Cameron sees a Harvard player speeding at him from the left, so he keeps moving.

Spiraling in his direction, nearly in reach. His fingertips graze the skin.

He's thrown to the ground.

A brown-colored uniform collides with him and collects the ball in their arms, and the Harvard heathen takes Cameron down. They both hit the turf with a clash and a thud, and Cameron lifts his head just enough to see which of his dumbass teammates screwed them.

Liam is sprinting with the ball in his arms. Or, more so, staggering, recovering from the friendly-fire that was trampling his own teammate. To add insult to injury: he gets caught. He goes down too. The buzzer sounds, and Brown University has lost.

First of the season. First of many.

Rowan trails over and holds a hand out to Cameron to drag him off the ground. He accepts the help and huffs, clapping his friend on the back.

"He fucked us," Cameron mutters, pulling his helmet off his head and whipping the sweaty hair off his face. "Asshole."

"Liam deserves to get punched in the mouth," Rowan says back, walking away from the brawl that was becoming their own teammates against Liam. "Let me guess, you're coming home with me?"

“That or be stuck in the frats with them,” Cameron sighs, working on gathering his stuff. Rowan looks at him expectantly. “I’m not gonna pick a fight with your roommate.”

“Even if he’s antagonizing you,” Rowan presses. Camerons mouth falls open. How is that fair in the slightest? “You’re giving off bully vibes. It doesn't help that you’re on the football team and in a party frat. Not to mention, you’re, like, double the size of him and I. You’re fucking scary. I would be defensive too.”

“Tell him to be nice and I’ll try .”

“Do better than try.”

“I will be extra kind if he doesn’t call me names,” Cameron offers back. Rowan considers it. “Hell, I’ll buy us all drinks if he can play nice.”

“Deal.”

They gather their things and duck into the changing room together—they don’t need to see the way Liam ends up bitching and fighting with everyone around him. They don’t need to see their team argue with Harvard, and the referees, and the coaches, in a futile attempt at a replay. It was useless. The game was done.

When their teammates pool in, everyone is in sour moods and just ready to go home. Some of them shower to avoid being on a rancid-smelling bus for an hour together, and others are too busy moaning about the loss. Cameron was one of the few who chose to shower—especially if his goal is to avoid going back to the frat. He doesn’t want to have to stop at home to shower off his grime, deal with the complaints all the way back to the house, and then put up with whining when he tries to leave. He changes into a spare set of clothes — jeans and a sweater to make it easy, and runs a comb through his wet hair as they shuffle to the bus.

“You had that shit stolen from you for no good reason,” Bryce mutters, shouldering him. Cameron nods, not entertaining the conversation. “How are you not pissed?”

“I am, but there’s nothing I can do about it now. It’s done,” Cameron shrugs off, plopping his bag with the rest of the team’s stuff to be loaded into the bus luggage storage. Bryce is waiting for him to unload his anger, to be a prick about it too. Cameron doesn’t bother.

“We had a plan, man-“

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” Cameron says back, stuffing his comb away and shaking out his still slightly damp hair. “I tried. But we’ve never been known as a good team, so… who’s surprised?”

And with that, Cameron clambers the stairs into the coach and plops into a seat beside Rowan.

The bus is loud on the way home— constant arguing, only interrupted by the coaches trying to give a pep talk. Cameron doesn’t pay attention— he tries to take a nap in his seat, headphones in and eyes shut.

It’s funny— an hour’s drive when he was growing up wasn’t much. In Florida, an hour-long drive is about a drive from his house to his aunt’s house in Lakeland. To get from Jacksonville to Miami is a 5 hour drive. But since moving up north, his tolerance for “long drives” has gotten shorter and shorter. Since moving to New England, where everything is no more than 20-30 minutes away, anything that takes “ getting on a highway” or crossing state lines feels like a road trip. Especially staying in Providence, Rhode Island for school, where everything is, for the most part, in walking distance.

They drive down I-95 for almost an hour, hitting some annoying traffic the entire way home as they run into a whole load of families driving home from Sunday mass. Cameron watches the cars pass and wonder what their lives are like— racing down the highway, trying to get to their next stop of the day. He wonders how many of those families are having a good morning, how many of them fought over their church clothes being ironed, and how many of them are driving in silence after a big fight.

They arrive back at the University and part ways. Cameron starts to follow Rowan, almost getting away with it, when someone stops him.

“Bro, you comin’ home or no?” Liam calls out. Cameron stops short. “C’mon, man. It’s guys night.”

“Got other plans. I’ll be home later,” Cameron said back, trying to immediately run out before he gets too many questions. It works.

Cameron dumps his bag in Rowan’s trunk and plops down in his passenger seat with a groan, nursing his headache with a bottle of Tylenol that sits in Rowan’s glove compartment. The drive is short from the rec-center to the dorms, but it gives Cameron enough time to

take some meds and cool off from being around so much testosterone for so long.

“Do me a favor,” Cameron requests quietly. Rowan side-eyes him. “If your roommate starts to be an ass, can you at least try to reel him in, so I don’t look like an idiot being nice to him?”

“He’s not that bad!” Rowan insists as they park, clambering out of the car. Cameron leaves his stuff in the trunk, while Rowan grabs his own bag. A breeze blows through, sending a shudder down Cameron’s spine. A hint of fall is creeping up on them steadily, a threat of pumpkin spice and cider donuts hovering over them. Cameron just sends Rowan a look. Rowan doesn’t know how to define the look, and yet, he still knows what it means. “Yes. I will try to reel you both in.”

“Thank you.”

Cameron has a pit of dread brewing in his gut as he follows his best friend up the two flights of stairs and down the winding halls to his dorm. He somehow just knows this will end badly. He knows this will be a shit-show.

Walking up to the door, they find it already open, and bodies inside.

“Since when do you throw parties in the room?” Rowan says jokingly as they enter, reaching out to give the one at his desk a “bro-y” head nod. Cameron can't tell if the pair get along or not. Greyson and Cameron make eye contact for a split second, only for them both to look away.

“This is the lamest party I have ever been to, if that’s the case,” the unnamed individual in Rowan’s chair teases.

Cameron folds his arms around himself, nervously rocking on his heels. He was already not very fond of the “Greyson” situation— now there's two new strangers to add to the mix? Sure, Cameron might be part of the “party fraternity” but he’s always been known as a shy-type, who clams up under pressure. He’s never been good at introductions, and has always been even worse at small talk.

“Santiago needed to study, and Luca was bored and tagged along,” Greyson shrugs. “I thought we talked about not bringing home diseases though, Ro.”

“And I thought we talked about being nice to my friends,” Rowan says back, clapping Greyson on the shoulder. “Greyson’s friends, this is my

best friend Cameron. Cameron, this is Greyson's friend, Santiago, and his roommate Luca. You already know Greyson."

"Unfortunately," Greyson mutters. Cameron grits his teeth but keeps his mouth shut. If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.

"Greyson," Rowan hisses. There's a beat of silence, and Greyson finally glances up again. Cameron is avoiding eye contact. He, quite honestly, wants to leave. But he doesn't really have anywhere else to go. His head is still pounding.

"Sorry," Greyson murmurs finally. "Do me a favor and don't put your shoes on the rug."

Cameron nods once, following the simple task of leaving his shoes at the doorway, and allocating himself to the only remaining safe place for him to sit— Rowan's bed. He sat criss cross, silently pulling out his phone, and leaving it at that.

The game is still in heavy discussion as they settle. Greyson moves on from slandering and making jabs at Cameron, and rather, decides to make some relatively friendly banter about how the game went. Greyson, who confesses to his friends that he knows nothing about American football, tries to entertain Rowan's ranting, meanwhile Cameron tries to settle down from an annoying morning.

"And fucking Liam- " Rowan groans, finally flopping onto his bed with Cameron. "Motherfucker not only ruined the play, and the game, but nearly fucking knocked out one of our only good players in the process."

"I saw you take a hard hit. That had to have hurt," the boy on the floor with Greyson— Luca, was it?— mentions. Cameron glances up, looking between Rowan and Luca, confused to have been brought into the conversation.

"Me?" Cameron hums. They all giggle at him. Cameron turns a horrific shade of red. "Oh- uh… yeah. Just bad enough positioning… I got tanked by my own team and Harvard both. But I'm fine."

"Sure you're not concussed?" Greyson says with a hint of annoyance in his tone. Cameron isn't sure if the comment was genuine or not. "Or is this just your normal reaction timing?"

"I-" Cameron starts, then stops himself. Rowan glances at him, eyes

soft and a small frown— pleading, begging him to not react. Cameron lets out a breath. “No. I’ve had concussions before. I’m not concussed. I’m just… not used to… this.”

Greyson glances up, eyebrows furrowed. They make eye contact again. This time, neither look away immediately. Greyson narrows his attention on Cameron. Cameron finally backs down and averts his attention— down at his fidgeting hands, which wrung around themselves nervously.

“What’s your game here?” Greyson finally asks.

“Greyson,” Santiago mutters before Rowan has the chance to.

“I’m serious. You go from being a dick to me to suddenly all kind and shy. It’s weird. If you’re putting up a front for my friends, it’s not working. They know you and your type just as much as I do,” Greyson insists. Cameron stays quiet. “Why aren’t you bickering back?”

“Will you stop being a freak?” Rowan requests, picking his head up slightly and glaring at his roommate. “At least one of you is trying to be a decent person. Maybe take a couple notes.”

“But why now?” Greyson shot back. “What changed that makes you decide that-“

“Greyson,” Santiago says again. “Leave it.”

There is a huff of defeat, and Greyson goes quiet. In fact, the entire room is silent. Cameron is starting to wonder if he made the wrong choice, if maybe the frat is a little less awkward, less painful, than this.

He shifts to leave. Pocketing his phone and scooting forward on the bed, he makes the ultimate decision that this was a mistake. He’s sure he could hide in his room at home. He’s sure Sam wouldn’t mind either leaving him alone or being quiet in the bedroom so he can take a nap, or just spend some time not getting harassed.

“Cameron,” Rowan groans. “Don’t go.”

“If I’m making things weird, I’d rather just… go. We’ll hang out later,” Cameron offers.

He hates this kind of attention. The way they’re all looking at him, expecting something from him. Expecting him to be rude, expecting

him to be mean back. Expecting him to throw a punch like Liam, or make some snarky comment. It's taking a lot of self restraint to not do that, but he really just wants to make Rowan happy.

At the end of the day, he's always been a people pleaser.

He knows he's not the nicest individual in the world. He knows he and Greyson never got along, but he's always been the type to stay quiet if it meant people liking him. He always gets pushed around to make others laugh. He's always the butt of the joke. Right now, though, he just wants to relax. He wants to not be bothered. The jokes aren't funny when they come from Greyson.

"You're not doing anything wrong, Cameron-"

"I'll see you in class tomorrow," Cameron offers, standing and starting toward the exit, slipping on his shoes again in the process.

"Cameron-"

He leaves.

Running a trembling hand over the back of his neck, his throat is tight. He hates this type of anger. He hates this kind of embarrassment. He hates this type of feeling, that sits somewhere between resentment and hurt. He worked so hard to be something bigger than the pushover. Cameron was tired of being the kid that everyone beat on for no good reason. He worked his ass off to be *here* , to play his sport, and attend an Ivy League school, and fake it with the fraternities. Somehow, someone as little and insignificant as *Greyson* manages to tear it all down again.

He tried. He tried so hard. Too hard. Rowan has to give him that. He tried so damn hard, and Greyson is, quite simply, not the type of guy you get along with.

Chapter End Notes

Lil introduction to Luca, and a little Cameron redemption??

All of you hating sotd!cam in the last chapter and for WHAT my guy was returning the same energy back. greyson was being a nuisance after cam tried being nice first,,, of course he's gonna get snippy.

I think what I love about this story arc is that they're both just,,,,

kinda shitty people. they're both snarky and annoying and refuse to look past their stupid pre-defined ideas of each other. cameron isn't the bad guy i demand respect and an apology for my mans. They're both just dudes trying to defend themselves not realizing that they aren't being threatened in the first place.

anyways. happy Speak of the Devil chapter three. happy saturday. have a good weekend nerds.
-hayl (@ hayloftown on twitter)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Take with a pinch of salt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dorm has been radio silent for days now.

Greyson knows Rowan is upset– he's doing that thing he does where he pouts about it and gives Greyson the silent treatment; doesn't invite him to lunch, or study groups, or whatever else Rowan typically drags Greyson along for. Their routine gets disrupted in the process. No walking to classes together. They don't go get their meals together. They didn't go grocery shopping together Sunday evening, or have their usual movie night on Wednesday.

So, needless to say: Rowan is pissed, and Greyson is too stubborn to apologize.

It's not that he doesn't have empathy, or a heart. It's not that Greyson wants to be a dick. It's that he doesn't believe that Cameron would truly, genuinely walk into this dorm room– *Greyson's dorm room* – with the intent of being friendly. There is no way in hell that man had any intention of having an afternoon of being friends and getting along. No matter how much they both love and respect Rowan, there is no chance they are the type of people who "get along".

For a moment there, Greyson did feel bad– really, he did. The way Cameron was so antsy to get out, how fidgety he was; Greyson wondered if he took it a little too far. He wondered if he was becoming the problem.

All it took was going to the dining hall that night, though, to be proven otherwise: seeing Cameron bro-ing around with the frats boys. Loud, and obnoxious, and probably drunk. Cameron had this stupid lopsided grin that doesn't show his teeth. It almost looks like a smirk. And he drank from his styrofoam cup– doesn't he know how bad styrofoam is for the environment? Hell– why would he care? Greek Life isn't known for being good, upstanding citizens, who care about much else other than themselves.

Greyson sat in the dining hall that evening with Santiago and Luca, picking at his food with less-than-interest, glaring, as Cameron was perfectly content in the setting he belonged in– with “the guys”, not with Greyson.

Friday night, Rowan returns home late. He drops his stuff in his hands on his desk, and his bag on the chair. He sighs, looking at Cameron’s jacket that’s been sitting on the back of his chair for nearly two weeks now– he keeps forgetting to bring it back to its owner. Mostly because Greyson and Rowan aren’t talking, meaning Greyson isn’t reminding him to grab it every day.

“You’re a real fucking piece of work, you know that?” Rowan finally says, their first interaction since Sunday. Greyson, who was rather comfortable in bed, a book in his lap, peeks up for barely a moment, before looking away again.

“If you’re just going to scold me like a kid, then save it,” Greyson sighs.

“No, I won’t. Because you act like a fucking child,” Rowan snaps. “And I can say whatever the hell I want. You are an inconsiderate, dense, absolutely numbskulled dipshit who can’t handle not having a situation be about you.”

“He says, making it about himself,” Greyson mutters to himself.

“Shut the fuck up,” Rowan hisses. Greyson snaps his book shut and looks at Rowan with a glare. “I’ve been your friend for *years* . I have never forced you to come to my events, or even asked you to have a conversation with my friends. I have only ever asked you to be civil and you can’t even do that for me? The one thing I ask of you is just too hard?”

Greyson scowls, arms folded over his chest and staring ahead. He refuses to be talked to like a kid. He’s not going to get shoved around by his roommate just because his feelings are hurt. Suck it up.

“He was trying.”

“Bullshit,” Greyson finally shoots back. Rowan goes to argue, but Greyson speaks over him. “People like him? They don’t *try* . They fake it, until they have shit on you that they can use to their advantage. They play a game, and it’s a game I always lose. I’m not getting played again, Ro. I’m not getting fucked over just because you want sunshine and rainbows between us. If you really hate this divide that much,

then choose him. Be his friend. I'll– I don't know. I'll move out. I'll find another living situation. I'll be out of your hair."

"It's not about choosing sides, Greyson!" Rowan shouts. "And it's not- it's not about whatever fucking childhood trauma you have that makes you think perfectly decent people are out to get you. I am more than willing to admit that some of my friends suck, and I'm more than fine with you disliking my sport, and I don't give a fuck about you hating Greek Life, but Cameron is a decent guy who is just as anxious of a person as you are."

"Yeah, right," Greyson rolls his eyes.

Anxious my ass . Cameron definitely seems anxious about all the parties he attends, all the people he sleeps with at random, all the stupid stunts he pulls on the field. He seems incredibly, horrifically anxious when he is being a loud annoying jock in the library, and when he's rough-housing in the quad, blocking the walkway, and when he's shoving around other dudes on the football field. He seems so terribly mortified of other people, showing up at Greyson's dorm without a pre-warning.

"You have such a limited worldview for someone who's come from across the world. I don't know how it's possible for one person to think so in-the-box," Rowan accuses. "You never even gave him a shot."

"Why would I?"

"Why did you give me a chance?!" Rowan exclaims, throwing his arms out. "Why did you let Santiago be your friend? Luca? Any-Any of your stupid soccer buddies– you hate soccer!"

"Because you're nice until it comes to your fucking friends. I swear, you're a totally normal person until it comes time to suck off your friends in the locker room, or-or-"

"I'll hit you," Rowan threatens. "Finish that sentence, I dare you."

Greyson silences himself. *Now* he's taking it too far. He knows that.

"You're being an intolerant prick, and that's not like you," Rowan insists. "You are becoming the very people you hate– you're mean for no reason. You're snarky and stuck up. You're an asshole to undeserving people. You're a snob."

“I get it,” Greyson groans, running a hand over his face.

“Do you?” Rowan is standing over him, hands on his hips. He almost reminds Greyson of his father– not quite angry. Disappointed. Upset with Greyson for failing him at something that should have been so easy. Greyson shrinks slightly. “If you don’t pull your shit together, I’m out. I’m done defending you. I refuse to endorse you being a prick to my friends who are making an earnest attempt to start over with you.”

“Okay,” Greyson nods to himself, biting his cheek. “I understand.”

“You fucking better,” Rowan sighs. “I hate this. I hate not being able to be with my two favorite people at the same time just because you’re too stubborn to be a decent person. Newsflash: Cameron isn’t your brother.”

Greyson nods, ready for his scolding to be done, and ready to not have his homelife weaponized against him. He doesn’t want Rowan to look like his mother, and he doesn’t like that comparison between Cameron, who Greyson trusts as far as he can throw him, and Greyson’s older and only brother, Wesley, who Greyson somehow trusts even less.

“We’re going to dinner tomorrow. Bring your friends. I’ll bring Cameron. We’re- we’re gonna go get a shitty meal, and go see a shitty movie, and we’re gonna get along, even if you have to fake it. Even if you get home and tell me how much you hate him. I don’t care. Be nice to his face, and he’ll be nice back. I promise.”

“Fine,” Greyson swallows the lump in his throat. “Dinner and a movie. It’s like going on a fucking date.”

“Watch it. I’ll make you hold hands if you’re not being nice,” Rowan threatens before sitting on his bed. “Text your friends and invite them.”

“Whatever.”

The next afternoon, Greyson sits in Santiago and Luca’s dorm, dreading the evening.

His head falls into his hands, and he groans yet again, whining something along the lines of “ I don't wanna go…” , only for Luca to insist it won’t be that bad, and Santiago to huff some sound of

agreement.

“I tolerate him the best I can, but it’s… it’s weird that he invited us. You know that, right?” Santiago murmurs. “Like… we’re… we’re not friends. I just get along with him for your sake.”

“Which is what I now have to do with Cameron,” Greyson whines. “He thinks if you guys come with me, I won’t be such a grouch.”

“Well, we can still have fun,” Luca says. Greyson shot him a glare. “You’re such a pessimist, man. Think about it. Food and a movie. That’s not bad. We get off campus for a bit, we hang out with them, your roommate is happy. Easy as cake.”

“Your crush on them is going to end in tragedy, I warn you now,” Greyson mumbles, picking his head up again when his phone buzzes– Rowan telling him to get his ass moving to the car. “It’s time.”

“Yay! I’m starving-”

Santiago and Greyson shuffle alongside Luca, who carries their optimism for them. They both put up some tragic attempt at smiles when they get to the car.

That is, until, Greyson spots the front seat taken.

“You’ll fit better in the back,” Rowan says, glancing over his shoulder as Greyson squeezes into the center seat. He hates small spaces. Almost as much as he hates touching people.

Almost as much as he hates Cameron.

“It’s fine,” Greyson murmurs in an effort to remain calm. For Rowan’s sake. Just try. “Can I have the aux cord please?” Cameron wordlessly passes it over his shoulder. Greyson mutters a small, “ *thanks*… ” and hooks up a playlist of his own choosing, featuring some music he knows at least three of the five of them enjoyed.

Rowan makes the conversation flow at first. He and Cameron continue the conversation they were having prior to Greyson and his friends getting in the car, and Greyson talks to Luca about volleyball, because they attend the clubsport together sometimes. Santiago chimes in occasionally to either conversation in an effort to blend the two separate groups. He’s a much better person than Greyson is, Greyson decides.

They go to dinner at Luxe Burger Bar, a place on Memorial Boulevard with average burgers and cheddar-tater tots. Greyson slides into the booth and sits forward on the bench, acutely aware of how many people have likely sat in this exact spot today. He stares at the table for a moment, likely littered with fingerprints, and the floor scattered with invisible french fries. He's sure they clean the place, but that anxious part of his brain can't help but wonder how *well* they clean.

"Loosen up," Rowan murmurs to Greyson, noticing the internal monologue before he could make it external. "I have hand sanitizer in the car."

"Okay," Greyson mumbles, settling his hand on the menu apprehensively. The stickiness of the pages makes his skin crawl.

"Something wrong?" Cameron asks. His voice is too gentle. Too genuine. Greyson hates it. It takes physical restraint to not glare at him.

"He's a… massive germaphobe," Rowan explains simply, not looking away from Greyson. "Restaurants are his nightmare."

"We didn't have to go out to dinner. We can do something else if you want," Luca offers. Greyson shakes his head, trying to focus on reading the menu.

"They have water-fire just on the river," Rowan suggests.

"It's fine. I'm starving. Let's just… eat."

He refuses to be the weird one here.

Back in England, it was rare his family ever went out to eat. It took a lot to get used to going to the dining hall at school (and he typically gets some of the cleaning wipes to wipe down the table and seats before he sits). Growing up, his family was always aware of how gross other people are.

They had to be.

Kids in the next booth with a sniffle might give Dad a sinus infection. If their server came into work with a cold, and Dad caught it, it was only a matter of time before he was in the hospital with pneumonia. Flu season was terrifying. The house was under quarantine at all times– the children came home from school, stripped their clothes to go in the wash, showered, and put on clean clothes before they would

even step in the same room as Dad. No risks.

Even years later, moved away from home, and Dad long since gone, Greyson can't help but feel dirty in public, and not trust those around him to be sickness-free.

But yes, *germaphobe* . That about sums it up.

Greyson rolls off his shoulders when they place their food order and rewards himself with a milkshake for his hardwork in behaving. He plucks the cherry from the whip cream by the stem, glancing at Luca, who was making a rather interesting conversation with Cameron about their shared enjoyment of video games. They were on the topic of something incredibly nerdy that also captured Rowan and Santiago's attention. Greyson sits back in an effort to look more relaxed, glancing at Cameron as he places the cherry in his mouth.

Cameron was looking at him, too.

And thus, awkward eye contact ensues as Greyson pulls the cherry from its stem with a little *pop* . Cameron glances at his mouth for a split moment before averting his attention to Santiago, who starts getting into the conversation, too. Greyson picks up his glass and takes ginger sips and tries to listen, ignoring that uncomfortable moment between Greyson and his sworn enemy.

Food comes next, and Greyson realizes, in that moment, that he's not quite cut out for diner food.

He watches his friends with burgers, fries, and, of course, cheddar-tots, and picks at a salad with his fork, knowing he'd rather die than use his unwashed hands to eat. Rowan offers him some tater-tots by pushing them onto Greyson's plate with a knife, and his friends jokingly tease him for using a fork to eat them, but they ultimately leave it be.

But Cameron is still watching with this… pout. Like he's disappointed.

Is this some kind of gotcha moment? Or is Greyson looking stupid? He's not sure.

"What movie are we thinking of tonight?" Greyson asks, as to not be silent the entire evening.

"Depends on what's showing," Rowan shrugs, talking through a

mouthful and covering it with his hand. Greyson nods. “If *Ant Man and the Wasp* is still showing, let's do that. If not… I dunno. Maybe we see that new horror movie about religion or whatever-“

“I don’t do horror,” Cameron interrupts suddenly, shooting a look at Rowan. “No way. Not that.”

“Too scared?” Luca teases.

“Yes, in fact!” Cameron defends. “They are meant to be scary, and I’m not meant to be scared. No thank you.”

“I vote for a horror movie just to hear him scream,” Santiago suggests.

“Seconded,” Greyson murmurs under his breath.

“We’ll find a movie that we can all agree on, now,” Rowan rolls his eyes, but smiles. He’ll take the playful banter and bickering over nagging and arguments. “What kinda cheese do you think is in these tater tots?”

“They’re called cheddar-tots, idiot,” Greyson says, the rest of the table laughing as Rowan begins to form a defense– ‘ *how was he supposed to know cheddar is a type of cheese ?* ’ – which makes them all laugh harder.

Greyson takes the middle seat again on the drive to the mall. Greyson gets the aux cord again, and this time, he’s nice and takes individual requests from everyone in the car, instead of playing what he assumes people might like. Rowan passes back the sanitizing wipes he promised, too, and Greyson rapidly wipes his arms and hands clean of grime. No one pesters him about it.

The parking lot is near full— no surprise, it’s a Saturday evening in the city. Rowan is circling the parking garage for a while before he eventually finds a spot, and they wander their way in.

They grab snacks before going in— boxes of candies stuffed into their pockets. Cameron takes most of their stuff, because he’s wearing a stupid jacket to hide it all in. Greyson can’t even make fun of him for wearing a jacket in September– for once, it’s a good idea, because it helps them.

They shuffle through the food court and up the escalator, looking over a busy mall with both wonder and amazement. Greyson looks around

himself, thinking, wondering. Five different people of all types, none of them from here. They're all transplanted from around the world, having wandered their way into a pretentious school in New England, wandering into a stupid movie theater together.

What are the odds of this?

Greyson doesn't like that idea— the "group mentality" that is the five of them. Cameron included. Because they're not a group. They're two separate sets of friends, mashed together to create a miserable, hideous work of art. There is nothing cohesive about them. They don't match. They don't belong together. Sure, they can maybe string together a couple similarities, but the comparisons die there. They are not meant to be a quintet.

Greyson has the misfortune of sitting between Cameron and a stranger in the theater. Cameron has the misfortune of being stuck in the theater showing *The Nun* , also known as: the horror movie he was not excited for, and begged for them not to choose.

Cameron, Rowan, Luca, and Santiago chat away. Greyson considers taking a nap in the seat, and maybe, if he's lucky enough, he'll sleep through the movie and the rest of the evening. He hopes, by some grace of God, time will speed up, and he will be home again.

It doesn't end up working out like that.

Cameron's knees bounce anxiously beside him. His hands have been fidgeting, too. Greyson recognizes the motions of a man who was scared shitless. He feels like an asshole for finding it funny, but in his defense, Cameron, himself, is an asshole. Greyson says nothing, looking the grown man over. He'll be honest: he's surprised that Cameron is so scared of horror. I mean… look at him. He's tall, broad, confident, and cocky. He's the exact type of dude in a horror movie who gets all the girls and does something stupid to get killed. Cameron looks like the kind of guy who would watch a horror movie just to get someone to curl up in his lap, use him as a shield, as a tactic of flirting or whatever.

And yet, here they are.

The movie was bad. Scary, sure, but plotwise, fell flat. The jumpscares were what got them the worst– Cameron yelped and hid toward Rowan's shoulder to shield his face several times, and Greyson will be honest, he had a few jumps of his own, but for the most part, they left the movie making fun of the terrible acting and awful plot.

“There was just nothing special about it. Like, most horror movies have something going for them. This one just felt like they wanted to make a horror movie and slapped a couple creepy effects on and a few jumpscares and called it a day,” Greyson says mindlessly as they wander down to the food court again.

“Religion is one of those topics that could so easily be turned weird and somehow they made it just… boring,” Luca agrees, falling to his side.

“Yes, boring. That’s definitely an adjective,” Cameron murmurs from behind.

“Listen, just because you were scared doesn’t mean it was good ,” Luca says back to him, turning to walk backwards with a teasing grin. Cameron gives Luca the middle finger.

“No horror movie is good!” Cameron defends. “But they’re not boring , that's for sure. I’m just happy it’s over.”

“You’re such a baby,” Rowan chuckles, elbowing him. Cameron elbows him back. “Cry about it, idiot.”

“Fuck off,” Cameron groans.

They have no direction to really go in– the dinner and movie Greyson agreed to is done now, but he would feel rude simply asking to go home now. He would feel mean to his friends to just ditch them at the dorms and go separate ways, and it might come off as holier-than-thou to demand they return to campus already. So, instead, he follows their lead– window shopping through the expansive mall, and admiring the view of the city from the windows on the top floor. Greyson’s eyes wander everywhere but the group he was here with.

“I need coffee,” Rowan announces. “Anyone want snacks or something for the drive back?”

“I’m down,” Luca hums, bouncing toward Rowan with an energy that Greyson doesn’t understand. At this hour, he’s ready to go home, take a shower, and go to bed. Santiago nods and agrees, starting toward Rowan as well. Greyson keeps wandering forward toward the windows to look out at the dimming city. He’s too tired to make the hike toward Starbucks.

“Okay, you two stay here, I’ll be back in, like, fifteen minutes,” Rowan says.

You two .

Wait.

“Hang on, I can-” Cameron starts, going to move toward the group, but they were already walking away.

And suddenly, they were alone.

Greyson bites his cheek, putting a little more space between them. He walks around the grand piano sitting in the middle of the otherwise empty side-space, away from shops, kiosks, and wanderers. Benches and chairs line the walls and the windows as a place for pedestrians to rest. Greyson goes to allocate himself to the window, away from Cameron.

Don’t start anything .

There’s a small ‘ *dung’* of a piano key clicking on the lowest end of the scale, a nervous tic from Cameron in an effort to fill the otherwise silent space between them. Greyson wants to scold Cameron for touching something that doesn’t belong to him, wants to tell him to just sit down and be quiet, but he just keeps reminding himself to behave.

The city is stunning at night. Greyson has always loved city life. The busy streets, the way the lights survive through the night, the way the highways are always moving below them, and the bedroom lights flicker on and off all evening. There is a soft glow of fire on the river from the routine Saturday-night full lighting for Water Fire, little gondolas sailing through, and crowds gathering at the fence edge to watch the flames.

Cameron hits a second key, the next note over. Greyson can almost picture Cameron standing directly behind him, just fumbling with little white piano keys mindlessly. There’s a sudden interruption of a sharper note getting hit, and Greyson glances over his shoulder to glare, but stops short at the sight of a little girl now fiddling with the keys, too. Cameron removes his hand that was hovering over the left hand side of the piano to give the child full access.

They make eye contact again, and both immediately look away. Greyson plans on watching the waterfire event again, but instead is drawn to the little girl, now sliding onto the bench and randomly mashing a couple keys, making nonsense noises while her parents grimace but fake smiles at her. Cameron slid into the bench, too, and

said something too quietly for Greyson to hear. The girl stops mashing the keys and looks up at him, smiling.

The next motion bewilders Greyson entirely: watching Cameron hit a few keys purposefully, letting the girl reach over and mock his motion. He does it again, adding another key each time, letting her copy him. He keeps going, until he's successfully taught the girl to play Twinkle Twinkle on the piano, sliding away to give her full access to put on a show for her parents, who excitedly record the song, cheering her on.

Cool. He's nice to kids. Big whoop. That's, like, the bare minimum.

Right?

Greyson takes the interaction with a pinch of salt and looks down at his phone for distraction– sends Rowan an ' *I hate you'* text and sinks into a seat near the window, trying his damndest to not look at Cameron, who was now striking up a conversation with the parents with a shy smile.

When the little family walk away, Cameron approaches where Greyson is sitting with an awkward smile. Greyson doesn't return it, which instantly dampens the man's mood.

"Am I allowed to sit with you?"

"I'd rather you didn't," Greyson says back.

"And I'd rather the day end already, but we're stuck together," Cameron argues. Greyson rolls his eyes. "I'm doing my best to be nice to you, because I love Rowan, and it makes him happy. So I'm gonna sit here, and you're gonna deal, got it?"

"Fine," Greyson huffs, staring down at his phone. "Knock yourself out."

Cameron sank into the seat beside Greyson and pulled out his phone too, opening his iMessage and starts texting someone. Greyson can already imagine– he's telling Rowan that Greyson is being an asshole, or complaining to the football bros, or texting his frat-brothers about how much he's hated this entire evening. Plotting his next douchey move.

Cameron adjusts how he sits every few moments, fidgeting uncomfortably, his knees bouncing, his app switching every thirty

seconds. Greyson wonders how one person could be so restless.

“Why are you actually doing this?” Greyson finally asks. There’s a beat of silence shared between them. “I’m sorry, but I have a hard time believing that you’re playing nice out of the goodness of your heart and some respect for your friend.”

Cameron scoffs and shakes his head.

“That’s more telling of your personality than anything,” Cameron murmurs. Greyson furrows his eyebrows.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If you can’t be civil with someone you don’t like for your best friend, you must not be a very good friend,” Cameron shrugs. “I’d do a whole lot to make him happy, even if it makes me miserable. And he does the same thing for me. Sometimes, you gotta compromise.”

Greyson frowns.

He wonders how much Rowan does around the dorm, does for Greyson, that he hates. He wonders how often Rowan is making stupid sacrifices to make Greyson happy. Because Greyson has never really been the type to make himself miserable for someone else. He’s never been the type to be self destructive for someone else.

Well, now he feels like an asshole.

“Sorry,” Greyson sighs. Cameron narrows his attention on Greyson, unsure if he heard him right.

“It’s… fine,” Cameron mumbles, settling against the seat again. “Lets just… do what we gotta do to be a good friend for him and go our separate ways. I won’t bother you if you don’t bother me.”

Greyson nods, and leaves it at that.

They are saved by the return of their friends, who offer them both cups of pretzel bites, and Santiago holds out an iced beverage from Starbucks to accompany it. Rowan has the grandest, most contagious smile at the sight of his two best friends, his favorite people, sitting together, not bickering. Even if they aren’t talking, even if they aren’t being “friends”, they survived fifteen-minutes of being alone.

Progress is progress.

The car ride home is loud. Apparently, in their venture for food and drinks, Rowan became best friends with Santiago and Luca, given by their laughter and inside jokes that apparently only took a brief-walk to develop. Cameron is joining in on the conversation, too– for some reason, he keeps looking at Greyson's friends with this weird light in his eyes, this odd twinkle in his grin. Not the smirky smile he always wears, but one that shows his teeth, that exposes his dimples.

There's this sudden overlap in groups– they're all friends with each other. Greyson sits in the middle seat, in the dead center of attention, and yet… he feels like the only one left out.

He's always the one who gets left out.

They all go their separate ways when they arrive on campus– Greyson goes straight to his dorm with a small wave to his friends, and Rowan offers to drive Cameron to the frat-house. Luca and Santiago go toward the library to continue their evening. Greyson gets to the dorm and instantly wants to shower.

He feels grimy, gross, and disease-riddled from the afternoon. He rapidly grabs his things to shower, letting hot water cook him alive in the stalls. It's a Saturday night, so the majority of his hall-mates are out partying, off campus, or doing something far more interesting than being in the dorms– he soaks up the opportunity to be alone. Running hands through his wet hair, he turns his face into the water and holds his breath.

Shower thoughts usually go one of two ways– planning the week ahead, and thinking about the past. Usually, he tries to plan ahead. Think about studying for tests, plan when he does his homework, make a mental schedule of everything he does in a week– club sports, recreational time, and random hangouts. But today, he couldn't stop thinking about everything else.

Thinking about how the hell he became mean .

His Mom when he was growing up always gushed about how sweet he was. He was a sweet boy. He was known for sharing, for being incredibly friendly. His teachers and tutors always sent home reports of how kind he was in the classroom, how he was so easy to love, and so joyous to have around. He used to be a good kid. And Greyson doesn't remember that changing. He doesn't remember when he turned sour, and why. He doesn't know what it was that made him a pessimist, and what made him so distrusting. Sure, he had his fair

share of unhappiness in his young life, but he doesn't recall it leaving lasting marks that turned him into such a grump. Maybe Dad died, and maybe his brother sucks the life out of everything, and maybe he packed up his life and moved across the world to get away from it, but he doesn't recall being so miserable.

When he returns to his dorm, dressed in clean, comfortable clothes, and his hair still slightly damp, Rowan is home, sat at his desk with this stupid smile on his face. He glances over his shoulder at Greyson and beams wider.

"That was really fun," Rowan says, reaching out to pat Greyson's arm. "You did fantastic. I appreciate it so, so much."

"Yeah?" Greyson raises an eyebrow.

"Seriously, yes. I know it wasn't your favorite, and I'm sorry about the dinner thing– I'll plan better next time. But it was so much fun. I really, really appreciate you trying," Rowan insists. Greyson offers a sad smile. "What? What's wrong?"

"Do you… do you do things you hate just to make me happy?" Greyson asks. Rowan sits back in his chair and ponders for a moment, a small frown creasing across his face. Finally, he nods. "Why?"

"Because it makes you happy? I dunno," Rowan shrugs. "Like… I'm not a messy person, but I would never keep my room this clean if it wasn't for you, and sometimes it drives me crazy when you make the room smell like a hospital. But I know you won't sleep at night unless you know for a fact that it's clean, so… I will do it."

Greyson frowns, sinking onto the edge of his bed. He's not sure why he thought Rowan was more like him– he always has the hand sanitizer and the disinfectant wipes in his car, and he does a really good job at staying on top of his messes, always. Greyson just figured… y'know. Like minds and all that.

"And I think tennis is boring, but you have fun with it, so I'll come to a couple of the matches here and there."

"You don't have to do that-" Greyson began.

"But you're my roommate!" Rowan says, smiling. "And it gets you all… giddy. You are in such a good mood when things are in their right place, and-and when I come to your events or whatever. And you try to do the same for me– I mean, look at today! I know you had

other things you'd rather do, but you did it, didn't you?" Greyson nods slowly, the guilt eating him alive, like some flesh-eating microbe. "It's not always about me."

Dammit .

"Okay," Greyson nods, sighing. "I get it." Rowan nods slowly, examining his posture– slumped, and disappointed, and his eyebrows, downturned like his frown.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Greyson shakes his head. "Nothing. Just… thinking about… stuff." Rowan nods slowly, but doesn't look away from Greyson. "Can I go to your game tomorrow?"

And suddenly, the smile is back.

"Really? Oh my God- I-I convinced Luca to come along. Santiago said he had something else to do but you and Luca can go together, and we can hang out afterwards, and-"

Greyson scoots back on his bed more, resting against the wall and listening to his best friend, his roommate, gush about the potentials of tomorrow. Greyson has only ever been to one game before, and it was when they first agreed on being roommates, so Greyson would understand what he does every Sunday. Rowan is practically trembling with excitement, plotting an entire day of fun all over again.

If Greyson is feeling up to it afterwards, they can go get breakfast together, and Greyson can choose the restaurant, or they can just come back to campus. Cameron can hang out too if Greyson isn't overwhelmed by the game, and they can try a second time at getting them all together again, and oh my God this is so exciting for him and-

Greyson just smiles and nods, thinking about what Cameron said earlier.

If you can't be civil with someone you don't like for your best friend, you must not be a very good friend . Greyson will be sure to change that.

Chapter End Notes

Lil angsty backstory for grey, because lord knows i can't NOT

write angst. thats all i do. im sorry. I feel like this chapter is a good "neutral" chapter where you simply can't hate either of them. they're just two dudes trying their best for their friend. sotd!rowan their beloved.

I'm impressed with myself for chugging out another chapter so quick, but im also incredibly lazy with editting this, so ignore typos and just accept the story as-is.

As always, follow me on twitter for any updates on when chapters will come. My handle is @ hayloftown.
happy Monday folks.
-hayl <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Fake it 'til you make it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another Sunday down.

Cameron hasn't spoken much with Liam since the Harvard incident— every time he thinks about it, he gets too worked up and ends up getting a headache. So, for the most part, he tries to avoid the topic, and Liam, all together.

It's kind of difficult when you're in the same house at all times, though.

Cameron sits in his seat at the kitchen table eating breakfast, just trying to go unnoticed. He's tired this morning. After being out all day yesterday, and the annoying quip between himself and Greyson, Cameron felt like he needed to sleep for a year. He felt like he needed a break.

The house was loud this morning— it's usually loud no matter the time of day, but it's usually extra loud on game-days. Bryce, barking orders, Aiden struggling to find his uniform, Liam picking a fight and trying to make himself the center of attention. The rest of the guys are either stumbling drunkenly from last night to find their clothes or too hungover to care. Cameron and Sam are the only ones not making a fuss— hence why Cameron was sitting with him. Cameron thinks Sam might be the only reason he hasn't lost all hope in the concept of Greek Life– he carries the philanthropic ideals whilst still being fun and not a dick.

"How are you not stressed? We've already lost once, and I'm not trying to be the same team we were last year," Bryce exclaims, pacing the kitchen with a hand running over his face and looking for something to do to make today better than last week. "Like-Like, after last Sunday? That was embarrassing, man-"

"I know, I was the one taken down by my own teammate," Cameron mutters under his breath, taking another bite of his cereal.

“Will you let it go already? You were gonna fumble anyways, dude,” Liam spits. Cameron rolls his eyes and ignores him. “You can’t fuckin’ catch to save your mother’s life. I was trying to do us a favor.”

“And in turn you screwed us,” Bryce says back. “I have a little faith in my man Cameron. And I made the plan. Don’t fuckin’ try to make decisions for the team without telling anyone.”

“You’re not the fuckin’ boss of me, man-”

The arguing gets louder, and Cameron stands, parting ways from the explosive kitchen and toward his and Sam’s room. He checks his phone on the relatively short stroll, frowning at a text from Rowan.

Rowan: *Don’t kill me.*

Rowan: *Greyson is coming to the game. He’s trying to be nice.*

Cameron sighs, pocketing his phone before he responds with some begrudging remark. He doesn’t want to ruin what has been a, for the most part, decent weekend. At least, for Rowan it’s been good.

And who knows– maybe this was Greyson’s weird attempt at an olive-branch. Maybe this was the start of something new. Something a little less awful.

Sam follows him up not long later, the pair of them getting ready to go and packing their bags for the game. The room is silent, nothing more than a dull hum of the downstairs noise and the fan to Cameron’s old laptop that has been running since he finished a homework assignment at midnight. God, he needs to replace that dinosaur already. He swears it’s been around since the dawn of time.

“Where were you yesterday?” Sam asks casually, pretending not to notice the way Cameron tensed at the question. “Just… wondering. Since you missed the team dinner.”

“Had a thing,” Cameron shrugs.

“With Ro?”

“Does it matter?” Cameron asks back. Sam furrows his eyebrows, a small frown crossing his face. “Can’t always go to every dinner, y’know? Gotta have a life sometimes.”

“I get it,” Sam reassures. “Just… surprised. Didn’t think you liked

Greyson."

"I don't," Cameron says, just as quickly. Like it was a defense. Like he was shielding himself from a gunshot wound. Sam looks at him with a small smile– an almost smirk– as if he was reading Cameron's mind. "I don't! He drives me crazy. He's annoying. I'm just trying to do what I gotta do to make Ro happy."

"What a loving, doting wife," Sam teases. Cameron rolls his eyes. "No one is gonna be upset if you like him."

"I don't like him. You're making this weird," Cameron huffs. "I'm being civil for my friend. Just like I wish you guys would be, too."

"Hey, I've never been the bad guy," Sam defends. "I've been playing nice."

"I know, I know… Just… everyone else. They take it too far. It's hard… It's hard to blame him for being mad when we have people like Liam around."

And the conversation ends there– they can only complain so much about their crappy friends and dislike of Greyson before they're talking in circles. It all leads back to the dramatics that Cameron thought he abandoned in high school– cliques, and rivalries, and popularity contests that shouldn't matter anymore. He's too old for this shit.

The game goes piss poor.

Cameron didn't expect any less, given the god-awful morale between everyone this morning. They didn't do a team breakfast, they didn't even really talk in the lockerroom this morning. It was a field of landmines, and one wrong step would have them all burst. To minimize the casualties, they were rigid in place.

And thus, they were rigid on the field, too.

Cameron carried on as usual. Rowan too. Sam is seemingly the third and final teammate trying to move on from their hard morning– they seem to carry themselves as per usual– swift feet, fluid plays, going where necessary in the heat of the moment. But 3 out of 11 isn't a very good ratio.

Much like their score for this game.

They were running with a solid 0 points, and they were sore losers, too. Cameron has to walk away from the team during intermissions in order to calm himself and not listen to their hurling swears and slurs at one another about their incompetence to play a game.

Cameron is getting shoved around by the opponents and his friends alike during the game. He's getting aggressive because of it— every pat on the shoulder, every shoulder bump, every tackle, it's all the same. He's scowling, arms folded over his chest and biting back unnecessary comments between plays. While the clock is running, he does his best to just follow the plan and pray he doesn't get hit.

The ball is hurtling forward again. It's their ball. Bryce had one hell of an arm on that throw. It's sailing toward Cameron and Sam. They're both sprinting. Cameron is trying to get the bodies off of Sam to keep him moving forward— Sam can get them their first touchdown of the game if they get this. Cameron is playing herd control with the players when he sees Liam, making yet another bee-line from his spot across the field to intercept. Cameron looks between opponents and his team and makes a split decision.

Diverge from the plan. Leave Sam hanging. Keep Liam from screwing them over.

The ball is lowering. Liam shoves through one of Sam's followers. Cameron sidesteps and trips him before he can collide with Sam. Liam tumbles through the turf over seemingly nothing, and Sam catches it.

Dead-sprint— Sam takes off toward their end zone. Cameron is running, trying to keep the other team off of him as he goes. Cameron wriggles through person after person and finally gets taken down by a linebacker. Doesn't matter— Sam reaches the end-zone, and they finally have points on the scoreboard.

Cameron gathers himself, steadily and surely, standing and rolling off his aching shoulder. He meets Sam in the middle with a high five, both beaming.

"Good call," Sam chuckles, panting for breath. "Scary call, but a good one."

"Dunno what his problem is," Cameron scoffs, but smiles anyway. He's about to walk to get his water when he gets a sharp shove from behind. Cameron whirls around.

"The fuck was that for, Cunningham?" Liam spits. "What the Hell was

going through your head there?"

"That was for *us* . I'm not letting you fuck us out of another touchdown because you want to have a star-moment," Cameron shot back, anger boiling over from the past week. "No one gives a shit if you think you're good. You keep pulling stunts like that, and everyone thinks you're shit. No one here can stand to play with you when you pull one over like that."

"To blindside the other team-"

"You're helping the other team!" Cameron yells. "You're handing them the ball!" Liam scowls.

"If you got something to say, fuckin' say it. Don't be a pussy," Liam spits, shoving Cameron by the shoulder.

Bad move.

"Woah, woah-" Sam intervenes. Simultaneously, Rowan and Bryce are both running toward them, full speed. Cameron jerks forward, shoving him back a few inches. "Cameron, stop-"

"Touch me again and I'll break your fucking jaw," Cameron threatens in a low tone, looming over him.

Liam, while he may appear large to the unassuming and unathletic, is rather small in Cameron's eyes. He's just shy of 6', not quite as dense in muscle (though, what he lacks in muscle is made up for in the density of his skull), and definitely not as powerful. Cameron is neither the largest nor strongest member on the team, but Liam doesn't scare him. Liam doesn't intimidate him. Liam might be able to throw a punch at a scrawny British dude and get away with it, but Cameron sees him more as a squeaky, squealing mouse.

"Easy, easy," Rowan says, pulling Cameron back by the arm. "Chill. Whatever it is, we can work it out."

"I don't see what there is to work out. Liam needs to be fucking benched," Cameron says with a scoff, but taking another step back toward Rowan and Sam. "Cut the shit, Hindman. I'm fuckin' tired of having to babysit you all game instead of actually playing like we're supposed to."

"What is happening? Why are we fighting?" Bryce asks.

“Cameron fuckin’ took me down!”

“You *tripped* idiot,” Cameron snaps. “He tripped over my feet, despite the fact that he was supposed to be left field while Sam and I were both right, getting the damn ball like *you* planned for us to do,” Cameron argues. “Then he had the fucking audacity to try pushing me around and cussing me out? Fuck you.”

“Fuck you!” Liam goes for another shove— or maybe it was an attempt to hit, Cameron isn’t sure. He just knows Bryce pushed Liam back, and Sam and Rowan both turned Cameron away before he fought back.

Shaking off his hands and overheated, Cameron takes a moment to sit.

Officials and coaches alike are getting involved in studying what happened, but it comes back inconclusive. They rule the play valid and Cameron walks away with a slap on the wrist for tripping Liam. The perpetrator, though, is worse for wear, still sitting on the bench as the rest of the team flood the field for the fourth quarter.

“He’s out?” Cameron asks whoever would listen.

“For the rest of today only,” Aiden mutters back, standing in position. “Don’t get your hopes up, Cunningham. He’ll be back.”

Cameron furrows his eyebrows, glancing at Aiden, at one of his closest friends. He’s tempted to ask what that means. He’s tempted to ask why he said it like that. Instead, the buzzer sounds, and they ready up for the fourth quarter.

It’s beautiful– almost a tear jerker– how smooth the rest of the game runs. They so fluidly move about the field without interruption. The only diversion from Bryce’s plays come from split second decisions to avoid getting tackled. It’s incredible how quickly they came back after what was a god-awful 3/4ths of the game. The timer is running out and they are tied– jumping from 0 points to 28. Liam has been throwing a hissy fit on the sidelines, but it didn’t matter– they weren’t paying much attention to him, and instead focusing on pulling back a win from nothing.

Cameron has never been the type to be full of himself. Never really been the one to consider himself better than others. If anything, he’s always been more self-deprecating and makes himself the butt of the jokes– it’s how he survives having such aggressive friends. But damn it

felt good to be doing well for once.

It felt even better to be the one to run the final touchdown of the game after they went into overtime, giving Brown University their first win of the season, and their first win in over a year.

The adrenaline rush goes to his head. The wind on his face, and the taste of iron in his mouth from exertion. Weaving through bodies expertly. This was his chance to prove himself, and it didn't take sabotaging his teammates to do so. He crosses over that finish line and slows to a stop, a relieved smile and sweat splicing across his face.

He's swarmed with his friends. For the first time, they aren't treating him like an outsider. For once, he's one of them. He doesn't feel like he's hiding in a crowd. He doesn't feel like he's an imposter, drifting through a group of people he has no right to be alongside. For once, he's liked.

Sure, he's friends with his team. He's in the frats. He's buddies with Bryce and Aiden, some of the top guys in the University, but he never really belonged here, until now. He's always been the one hidden in the corner during parties. He's the quiet one at their group dinners. He goes to the events he needs to be at and hides among the crowd.

He's never been the popular one. Never been the cool one. Not here, and not at home, and never anywhere else. This is a first for him.

They're smiling. They're laughing. They're patting him on the back and cheering him on. They're a team.

"That was fucking incredible," Rowan exclaims, shaking his shoulder, grinning ear to ear. "I've never seen someone run like that, holy shit-"

"That was impressive," Bryce agrees, throwing an arm around Cameron's neck and jostling him, knocking on his helmet. Cameron, if he wasn't already red in the face from exertion, was definitely like a tomato now. He's not too fond of attention like this. His stomach is doing somersaults, and his head is struggling to comprehend it all– the noise, the touches, the overpowering stench of sweat, the bitterness in his mouth as his lungs try to compensate for the sprint he just did, the throbbing muscles and aches in his joints. "I need you to do that more often. I need to revise my plans, man. You're like a secret weapon."

"Never been a secret that he kicks ass," Rowan chuckles, the crowd carrying themselves toward the bleachers with grand smiles. Cameron gets the humid and heavy helmet off his head, tucking it under one

arm, still panting for breath.

They're celebrating. There's word of a party tonight at Delta Phi. There's always a party at Delta Phi, though– one of the only highlights about the chapter is the fact that it's a party fraternity. Cameron was quick to learn that they weren't kidding– it's always a party. It's always loud, and hectic, and busy.

He's regretted rushing since moving into the house, when he discovered just how noisy it is at all times. His first year, he wasn't in the house, so he was okay with it– show up for a few hours, go back to the dorm, sleep off his overstimulation headache. But now that he's always there, now that he can't escape at the end of the night, he is typically stuck until nearly 3AM with party-goers, drunken friends, and oftentimes, being the one left to clean up the mess. That's what he gets for being the sober friend who cares about cleanliness.

The locker room banter is loud and proud this afternoon as they clean up and celebrate their win. His friends, shouting through the shower curtain, discussing vulgar ideas of how to celebrate tonight, considering the best course of action– get drunk and then hookup, or vice versa, or both at the same time, and with who– it's a lot to take in. Cameron showers and changes, keeping his head down and his mouth shut.

Rowan elbows him in the rib, sending a little smirk his way.

"You look like an old catholic grandmother listening to them," Rowan murmurs. Cameron gets redder. "Loosen up. No one's forcing you to join in. You can come hang out with us if you wanna."

"I am forced to join, though," Cameron whispers back. "That's what I signed up for."

"You know what they say, man…" Rowan shrugs. "Fake it 'til you make it."

"I'm a bad liar…"

"One of the worst, yes," Rowan smirks, elbowing him. "My door is always open."

Cameron just sighs and shakes his head, pulling a hoodie over his head. He wants to beg Rowan to come tonight– be at the party as his human shield, and give him someone to talk to. He doesn't want to keep being the center of attention. But alas, Rowan was smart, and

didn't rush any Greek Life, meaning… he is free to be wherever he wants.

Walking out of the locker room together, Cameron strolls at Rowan's side until the absolute last possible minute. Into the parking lot they walked, where they found both Luca and Greyson, leaning against Rowan's car with little polite smiles. Luca's, much grander than Greyson's.

"That was awesome!" Luca exclaims, beaming as they approach. "Those last eight seconds? Cam, dude, that was so cool. Major props."

"Thank you," Cameron says with a shy smile, hands stuffed into his sweatshirt pockets. He glances over his shoulder at the crowd steadily leaving the stadium. "Ro killed it, too. Couple well timed throws, and got knocked around like crazy."

"I'm gonna be feeling that in the morning," Rowan agrees with a small chuckle, digging through his duffel for his lanyard. He finally pulls it out, the keys jingling on the end. He twirls it around his hand, rocking on his heels. "So, you have to go to that stupid thing at Delta Phi. But we are going to go get food and hang out at the dorm. So if you end up getting to sneak out, feel free to join us."

"Yes, absolutely," Luca agrees, standing upright. Cameron risks making eye contact with Greyson, who offers an attempt at a polite smile. It's awkward, but Cameron is impressed nonetheless. "Join us if you can."

"I'll try," Cameron nods, patting Rowan on the shoulder. "If not, see you tomorrow in class."

"You bet. Good luck," Rowan says, a small smirk as Cameron is visibly drained of any remaining energy just looking at the direction Bryce and Aiden were walking from. "Text me if you need anything."

"See you in a bit…"

That could have been worse.

Sure, Greyson was silent the entire time, but the smile? That was better than yesterday. And there was no arguing. And Luca, being the kind soul he is, making easy conversation. Cameron walks away with a pang of hope, feeling like he accomplished something.

"Rowan not coming with?" Bryce asks as Cameron falls into line with

them.

“No, he had plans,” Cameron murmurs back, a chill running down his spine as a breeze blows through.

“Of course he did,” Aiden scoffs. “It’s always about the fuckin’ roommate. Just once, he could leave his girlfriend at home and hang out with us.” Cameron keeps his mouth shut and averts his attention to the ground. “Work your magic and turn him to the light side.” Aiden pats him on the back. Cameron just nods and stays quiet.

If he had a choice, he wouldn’t go to the parties either. But no matter how much he hates them, he has to go.

And God he hates them.

The house is loud from the start. They don’t even need the guests to be here before it’s too noisy for Cameron. Setting up for drinks, food, cleaning up enough to not look like a hoard of 20-year-old boys live here. 40 different college students, all restless and whining about something– the drinks aren’t cold yet, and they want to drink now. They’re hungry, and they’re tired, and they’re sore, and they’re annoyed by the other team today, and Liam is pissing someone off, and someone is pissing Liam off. It’s always something. Who needs a party when the house is already a festival of dumb boys who can barely tie their own shoes without making some kind of noise?

The house fills fast. It’s an open-door event, meaning just about anyone can walk-in. People they’ve never met. People who have never been to a party before. People who think they can drink their weight, only to be absolutely destroyed after a single Smirnoff Ice. The house gets louder, fuller, crazier. Music is making the walls vibrate. The floorboards too. Cameron has had several drinks handed to him, most of which he pours into the sink or the grass with a crinkle in his nose when nobody’s looking. He has a few– little things he mixed for himself to blend in, but he’s barely buzzed. He avoids being drunk like the plague. Especially being drunk around these guys. He trusts them as far as he can throw them, and he’s a lightweight, so it wouldn’t take much to make him a little too easy of a target.

He hides in the backyard with Bryce and Sam. He’s been swirling around a stupid little fruity drink for about an hour now– Bryce has been sure to tease him to hell and back over it, too– “ *what, you getting a nursing degree? Must be with how you’re treating that cup* .” Cameron thinks it’s amusing, for the most part. He likes Bryce enough to not

mind getting teased by him. He sways from side to side to keep himself awake, enjoying the moment of peace and cool, fresh air.

He glances up at the sky and frowns. He misses the stars. He misses looking for the Little Dipper and Orion's Belt. Night time isn't quite the same anymore without the pinholes in the sky, giving Cameron something to think about endlessly– almost as infinite as space itself.

"If we keep doing somethin' similar each game, we might be able to-"

"Cameron," Liam cuts in, walking up with a certain attitude in his gait. Cocky, loud, and definitely drunk. "The fuck was that today?"

"Dude," Bryce sighs. "Chill. We won. Let's celebrate a little."

"No, you're a fuckin' backstabber," Liam accuses through slurred words and stumbled steps. He jams a finger in Bryce's face at the accusation, spitting his aggression at him, first. "You're s'pposta' have my back, you fuckin' traitor. And you bench me? Me? You fuckers would flounder without me ."

"Buddy, you're drunk. Go lay down," Cameron says gently. "Sleep this off, we'll talk tomorrow."

"Shut your goddamn mouth, you-" Liam whirls around to him. "You ruin everything for me. No one fuckin' likes you. Why are you even here, man? To wave it in my face?"

"Liam," Cameron says again, keeping calm. "Go cool off before you do something stupid."

"Like this?"

He swings. Just like he swung at Greyson. Just like he swung earlier today. Despite his slow motions and stumbling, the fist came so quickly, Cameron didn't have a chance to dodge. Knuckles meet jaws. Cameron takes a staggered step back, away from him, from all of them. Bryce grabs Liam's arm before he can go for a second punch. Cameron grimaces and runs a hand over his own face, moving his jaw slowly to test its stability.

"So much for breaking my fuckin' jaw, big guy," Liam says with a laugh. Cameron looks at him, aghast.

"Don't," Sam mutters. "Walk away, Cameron."

“C’mon, tough guy. I can take ya. What do you have to lose? Lord knows you’re not looking to impress anyone other than your ego and maybe your boyfriend Rowan.”

“That’s enough, Liam,” Bryce barks.

“Is it? Is it enough, Cammie? Gonna be a man and fight me? Or a bitch and take it?”

“Walk. Away,” Sam says in a low growl, as if threatening him. As if Cameron was the problem here. Cameron looks at Bryce. He’s always followed Bryce’s leadership. No matter what. Maybe it’s gotten him in trouble before, but he doesn’t know who else to trust if not Bryce, who’s done nothing but be a good friend and taken care of Cameron thus far.

“Go,” Bryce says quietly, grunting as Liam tries to shove through him. “Go inside or something. I’ll deal with it.”

Cameron would rather die than go inside.

And so, he didn’t.

He walked around the perimeter of the house, letting Bryce and Liam yell it out in the backyard, and onto the road. One hand still tracing his jaw, he grits his teeth and takes a shaken breath. His free hand curls and clenches into a fist at his side. His hands are trembling. His face is red hot. His eyes blur when he looks at the streetlights and scans the sky for stars again. Still, nothing.

He has nothing on him. Not even his wallet. Just the clothes on his back and his phone in his pocket. The street is loud with city traffic that never dies out.

Cameron texts Rowan.

Cameron : *can I come over? I need a minute away.*

Rowan doesn’t respond. Cameron is walking all the way across campus— he’s keeping his head down, because even on the campus grounds, the city isn’t necessarily the safest place to be. Hell— especially on a college campus. Cameron feels like a walking target. He keeps hoping Rowan will respond to his text— something easy. Something quick. Just a simple “ *yeah sure* ” will suffice.

He’s cold, and his cheeks are wet with tears, and he’s not sure why

he's crying. It didn't hurt that badly. It wasn't that scary. He's okay. He's fine. Right?

Right.

He's standing outside the dorms, pacing, shivering, panicking. He checks the temperature– a cool 50 degrees, which is making him feel like he's turning to ice. He would love to be back home in Florida right now, sat in his childhood bedroom with a fan blowing in his face to temper the astronomical heat. He pulls up Rowan's contact again and frowns. He hates phone calls.

He hits the phone icon.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Rowan answers on the second ring. Cameron stammers for a response, but is unsure what to say. "You never call. What happened?"

"I cannot be at the house right now," Cameron murmurs. "Can-Can I hang out in your lounge or something for a bit? To-To cool off? I'm outside."

"Christ, yeah, yeah, one second. I'll be down in a second," Rowan said, a sudden rustle and murmur of chatter from the background. "I'm gonna go let Cameron in. Hang on."

Cameron is rocking nervously on his heels, trying to pull himself together, but Rowan reaches him first. Rowan opens the auto-locked door with a frown, waving him into the building. He pats Cameron's shoulder and furrows his eyebrow.

"What happened?" Rowan asks, startled by what looks like the remnants of a panic attack on his best friend. Cameron shrugs, staying quiet. He runs a hand over his face again in an effort to wipe the idea of tears away. They were already dried, though. He doesn't wanna make drama for his friend. "C'mon. We'll go to my room."

"I don't wanna bother Greyson-" Cameron says, his voice barely a whisper.

"We have his friends there too. It's fine. Come chill out for a bit," Rowan insists.

"Seriously, Ro, I don't want to pick a fight with him right now. I can't do it," Cameron insists. "I-I just don't wanna sit outside all night. That's all. I don't need to-"

“I’ll kick him out before I let you have a sleepover in that stale-ass lounge,” Rowan argues. “You’re coming to mine, and you’ll relax there.”

Cameron gives in— he’s too tired to try arguing. He shuffles behind Rowan up the stairs, hands stuffed into his pocket and a hood pulled over his head. He shudders at the top of the stairs, glancing both ways before strolling toward Rowan’s open door. Inside the room sits three individuals– Greyson, sitting on his bed with a pillow on his lap and his phone in his hand, Luca, sitting on the floor with his back pressed against Greyson’s bedframe, and Santiago, sitting at Greyson’s desk. They’re talking about something to do with a club they’re all in, Cameron thinks. He’s not really paying attention.

He kicks his shoes off and neatly sets them to the side, out of the way, murmuring a quiet apology for interrupting before sitting on Rowan’s bed. He’s careful not to stand in anyone’s way, or step on any toes– metaphorically or literally. He pulls on his sleeves and folds his arms around himself, head resting against the wall.

“Welcome in,” Santiago greets. Cameron gives an awkward smile and a small wave. “You alright?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cameron nods, swallowing the lump in his throat. “Just… really tired.”

“So… you left your house, instead of going to bed?” Greyson questions. Rowan shot him a glare. “Genuine question- don’t look at me like that!”

“It’s too loud at the house, and I have a headache,” Cameron says back, hoping the questioning would stop there. Greyson frowns slightly. It’s clear he had more to say, but he kept it to himself. “I’ll be quiet. Promise I won’t interrupt again. Go back to what you were doing.”

“You’re fine, bud,” Rowan murmurs, pulling a water bottle from his mini-fridge. “Drink and relax.”

Cameron nods, cracking the cap off and avoiding looking anyone in the eye again. He sips some water down, shrinking down into a more comfortable position, propped against the wall.

He doesn’t want to cause issues. He doesn’t want attention. He just wants a moment of space. Somehow, being in a tiny dorm room with four other people is better than his own bedroom.

Greyson is quiet for a few minutes while Luca, Santiago, and Rowan resume their conversation they were having before Rowan stepped out to retrieve Cameron. Greyson wasn't just thrown off by Cameron's presence. No– he was confused by everything about this situation. He was wondering what had Cameron so red in the face, his eyes so dark and heavy. His usually fidgety hands are just lifting the bottle of water to his lips and tracing his jaw. When he's not drinking the water, he's chewing on his lips and staring off into space. Greyson wanted to read his mind. He wanted to know how that happened to make the all-powerful Cameron crumble.

Next, Greyson looks at Rowan. He seemed so… stiff. So rigid. Rowan keeps looking at Greyson, too. He was examining Greyson's behavior, his statements. He was on edge. It's rare they see Rowan so serious—it takes a lot of anger for him to get to this state. Only when Greyson is being an insufferable asshole, or Greyson has been hit by an insufferable asshole, has he seen this look.

The conversation keeps circling, and Greyson loosens up. He keeps glancing between Cameron and Rowan, but he tries to allow Cameron that privacy that Greyson knows he would want if he was having a rough evening. He doesn't mention the way Cameron looked so nervous. He doesn't ask Cameron about the slow developing bruise on his face. He doesn't ask why he looked like he's been crying. He lets the man be.

"What did you really think about the game today?" Rowan asks. "Be honest. I won't be offended."

"It was fun!" Luca insists. "It's more interesting in person. Watching it on TV and streams is still boring."

"It wasn't bad," Greyson confesses. "It… it was kinda cool feeling the energy coming off of everyone. And that last quarter was… intense."

"So you'll do it again?" Rowan asks, smirking.

"Don't push it," Greyson chuckles.

"Please?" Rowan pleads. "For me?"

"Maybe," Greyson tempers. Rowan sits up straighter and grins. "I'm not going to every game."

"Never said you had to."

“And Santiago has to go to the next one, too,” Greyson negotiates, looking at his friend. Santiago’s mouth fell agape, glaring at Greyson. “Who knows. Maybe you’ll get some fun out of it, too.”

“You are the worst,” Santiago says decidedly. “Why do I have to go?”

“Because you’re gonna be my friend. Whether you like it or not, we’re friends now. I’ve decided,” Rowan declares, clapping his hands together. “We’re friends.”

“And I have no choice in the matter?”

“Not at all,” Rowan declares.

Greyson smirks, sitting back again and glancing at Cameron. He planned on bringing Cameron into the conversation– play nice, fake it, all that. Though, he glances over, and instead of finding Cameron staring-off again, he discovers the fifth person to their quintet asleep. Slumped over slightly, neck craned at an awkward angle, arms around himself in an effort to keep his warmth. It was almost sweet– seeing someone traditionally so aggressive and annoying, look so gentle and peaceful.

Just as quickly as it arrives, Greyson blinks away the thought, and resumes his bickered conversation, convincing Santiago to give it a shot, and Santiago begging to be released from this hellscape. He can’t help looking over again, though. And again. And again. He just keeps looking, just keeps wondering, just keeps thinking about what the hell was happening.

Chapter End Notes

Whoop, there it is.

grey is thinking. Or, as my lovely sister in law would say, he is thinking with his thoughts. And the thinking he shall continue to do. For a long, long time.

This was a fun one to write. I feel like it's not quite Good Enough but I don't know what more to add, so take it or leave it.

Until next time, folks o7
-hayl (@ hayloftown on twitter)

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Curiosity killed the cat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cameron wakes up the next morning still in Rowan's bed.

The first thing he feels is guilt for taking over his best friend's dorm. The second thing is ache, from being crunched in an awkward position to fit both himself and his best friend on the bed. The third is the total, complete mortifying embarrassment, looking over to find Greyson at his desk, awake and working on an assignment.

He rubs his eyes and presses himself up on an arm, feeling around for his phone. It sits between him and Rowan, who slept at the very edge of the bed. It was neither the first, nor will it be the last time the boys have shared a bed— such is life for broke college students who travel a lot— but it didn't make him feel any less guilty. It's not entirely weird for them– they both grew up with a plethora of siblings, and view one another as no different than another sibling.

Cameron taps his screen and frowns at the time. 7:30.

It is way too early.

He's tempted to lay down again, or maybe go take a shower, but Greyson seemingly notices him just then, glancing over his shoulder and offering yet another painfully awkward smile.

"Morning," Greyson murmurs, propping his chin in his hand and looking back at his laptop.

"Morning," Cameron exhales, rubbing his eyes. "Sorry. I… didn't mean to crash."

"You're fine. Better his bed than mine," Greyson says back, shrugging. Cameron furrows his eyebrows. It's unlike Greyson to be so… relaxed. So laid back about someone in his space. Cameron expected an argument or snide comment. Not… kindness. "Did you sleep okay?"

“I slept,” Cameron confirms, trying to stretch out his aching arms. “That’s what counts.”

“…sure.”

Cameron slowly clambers out of bed, trying not to bother Rowan. He checks his phone again to discover that it was minutes from death– a whopping 4% charge. He steals Rowan’s charger to plug it in, and in the process, gets a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

“Fuck,” Cameron mutters under his breath, passing his fingers over his face. Greyson bites his cheek.

“Was wondering how long it would take for you to notice,” Greyson mumbles. “Not your best look.”

“Could… could be worse,” Cameron sighs, pulling away. “Not swollen, at least. Just… green.” Greyson nods slowly. “Better than a split lip.”

“Fuck off,” Greyson rolls his eyes. So close. “What happened? Took a ball to the face?”

“More like Liam’s fist, but sure,” Cameron sighs, sitting back down on the edge of the bed and reaching for his phone to check for texts.

A good amount of them were Bryce or Sam asking where he was. Sam asked if he was OK. Bryce was bitching about Liam. Aiden was asking what Cameron did.

Never a dull day.

“What’d you do to get on his bad side?” Greyson asks, whirling around in his desk chair with sudden interest. Cameron glances up, making brief eye contact. Greyson has this glimmer of excitement in his expression. “Sleep with his girlfriend? Replace his shampoo with Nair?”

“That’s smart,” Cameron hums, sitting back on his palms. “I hadn’t considered that one.”

“Sleeping with his girlfriend?”

“Making him bald. He couldn’t get a girl if he paid for one,” Cameron responds. Greyson scoffs out a short laugh, only to immediately realize what he was doing and stop. “ *What I did* was tell him he’s shit at football and asked to have him benched. Not my fault they went

through with it."

"Ouch," Greyson chuckles. "That's harsh. Surprised you didn't get a matching black eye."

"I'd knock his teeth out before I let him get another hit in," Cameron declares before looking back at his phone. Greyson is still looking at him. Cameron can see it from the corner of his eye— Greyson, facing him, studying him with piqued interest.

Curiosity killed the cat…

"You're staring," Cameron mentions, in an effort to remind Greyson of his manners. Greyson instantly looks away, back to his study-materials, and leaves them sitting in silence. Cameron glances at his sleeping best friend and considers leaving, letting him sleep. He knows he should really get back to the house before someone calls him out, but, in all honesty, he would rather eat glass.

Worse: he would rather spend the morning with Greyson.

"Why do you hang out with them?" Greyson asks.

There's that damn cat again.

"I have to," Cameron shrugs, sitting back against Rowan's wall. "I kinda signed up for it, y'know? Football, and… and Greek Life. It's a lot of money to not be around them."

"But you have to know they suck, right?" Greyson says, frowning down at his textbook as he continues to fake his attention to it. Cameron raises an eyebrow. "I'm not trying to be rude, but they are blatantly horrible people. They don't even try to hide it."

"Neither do you," Cameron shrugs. "They have flaws. I am first to admit that. They drive me up the wall sometimes. But just like Rowan insists you have your advantages, they are not all bad. You make a caricature out of people you dislike and expect them to be kind back? Doesn't work like that."

"Is it a caricature, or am I just pointing out the obvious and unforgivable?" Greyson asks back, turning back around in his chair. "They're misogynists. Homophobic. Willfully ignorant of the real world. Classist-"

"I get it," Cameron mutters, running a hand over his face. "I don't

know what you want me to do about it. You so frequently lump me in with them, I don't even know why you're talking to me about it."

"Like you said– Rowan has a little faith in you, and at the bare minimum, I trust he isn't a liar," Greyson shrugs. "And if he's even slightly right about you, you would notice the trouble too."

It feels like he's been scolded by his father. A threat of disappointment from a man he barely knows. Cameron avoids eye contact, and he avoids response. Because Greyson is right, dammit. Of course Cameron notices when his friends suck. Of course he knows that they are shitty people. He didn't feel safe enough to go to his own bedroom last night because of them. He still doesn't entirely feel safe going home.

"This is dumb," Cameron murmurs.

"Yep."

He needs to eat.

Cameron runs a hand over the back of his neck and makes the executive decision that it is time to go. It's time to risk seeing the world and all those in it for the sake of a bagel. He goes to the door to slip on his shoes, and he catches Greyson peeking over to watch him get ready to leave.

"When he wakes up, let him know I'm gonna be at the dining hall?"

"No promises," Greyson murmurs back before lowering his gaze. Cameron rolls his eyes and nods. Whatever.

Greyson watches the door click shut behind him and lets out a sigh of relief.

He's always been prone to overthinking, to being a little too curious. He's always asked too many questions and thought too much about the wrong things. Cameron is none of his business, and neither is his relationship (or lack thereof) with his teammates and frat-bros. Why Greyson gives a shit in the first place, he has no idea. Cameron getting hit was likely deserved– lord knows Greyson isn't innocent from wanting to punch him. But there's this inkling of a thought that maybe, perhaps, Rowan wasn't entirely wrong.

Maybe.

He thinks about Cameron in the Providence Place Mall the other day–

playing piano and teaching a little girl how to play a song. Greyson wonders how many football players would do that; give the time of day to a small child with eyes the size of the moon and curiosity that will kill most cats. He wonders how many of his frat-bros would even know how to play piano– lord knows it's considered far too delicate for big burly men with the pride of lions.

Rowan wakes with a rub to his eyes, looking around the small room for his friend. Greyson takes a highlighter to his textbook.

"He left."

"Hm?" Rowan yawns, running a hand over his face.

"Cameron," Greyson murmurs. "Went to get breakfast. Asked me to tell you."

Rowan pushes himself further upright, glancing around the room again.

"You spoke to him?"

"I'm not heartless," Greyson shrugs, propping his chin on his hand.

They return to silence.

Greyson is slow moving that morning. He's not entirely in the mood to go to his classes, or go take his quiz that morning, and definitely wasn't interested in attending his study group. He was up late last night, studying Cameron's most peaceful and tolerable state: asleep in Rowan's bed. He recalls chatting with Rowan long after their guests left for the night, asking if he would be okay with Cameron taking up his bed. Rowan responded, at the time, that he didn't mind. Greyson tried to not cringe at the idea– sleeping so close to somebody for so long, being in such close proximity.

Perhaps that's another one of his "germaphobe" quirks.

Greyson shuffles across campus with his phone pressed to his ear, his shoulders heavy with exhaustion, and his eyes ready to rest shut for several hours. The library is in view, where he knows his study group is anxiously awaiting his arrival to discuss the most complex of astrophysics, despite the fact that none of them are studying astronomy for much more than an elective and a Gen-Ed requirement.

“Are you even listening to me?” his mother asks with a small sigh. She does that a lot. Sigh. Puffs out her lifelong miseries into her exhales after she speaks.

“Of course, Mum,” Greyson murmurs back. “I’m very tired.”

“Are you sleeping enough, dear? I don’t want you getting sick because your brain is just so tired,” Mum quips, followed by a sharp, pterodactyl screech from the background. “PJ, will you please use your indoor voice?”

“I’m sleeping plenty. It’s just early in the semester still,” Greyson insists. If anyone is more anxious than himself about getting sick, it’s his mother. He might be a germaphobe, but his mother’s ritualistic health routines are significantly more intense. “How’s Pheebs?”

“Ask her yourself,” Mum says. “Putting you on speaker. Say hi.”

“Phoebe!” Greyson calls his little sister. “How are you?”

“Grey,” Phoebe says back, her voice carrying closer to the phone. “Grey, I-I have so much to tell you. At school, I made a friend with this boy named Oscar, and-and he has a pet turtle, Grey. His turtle’s name? Guess the turtle’s name.”

“What is the turtle’s name?” Greyson asks, a small smile crossing his face.

“Guess!”

“Hm…” Greyson dramatically ponders the name of the shell-ed friend, imagining the look on his little sister’s face. Her cute little brown pigtails, and the big blue eyes that makes her look like Dad. She also has his height– at a mere 8 years old, Greyson already fears how quickly she may outgrow him. She’s on a trajectory to be perhaps 5’10-6’ tall. “Sheldon.”

“No! Try again.”

“Peter.”

“No,” Phoebe groans. “His name, Grey, his name is *Grey* . How funny is that! A turtle has the same name as you!”

“That’s very silly,” Greyson hums, smiling.

“Mummy says I shouldn’t touch the turtle, because he could be dirty

and gross, but I think I can convince her to get me a pet. I'm very lonely, Grey. I want a kitty."

"Yeah?" Greyson's smile falters slightly.

He can only imagine how quiet the house gets with just the two of them, when it once was five people crammed in there. The halls used to echo with the sound of two boys and a baby girl. The kitchen used to always be loud with stories and laughter. The entryway was noisy with the rituals to keep the house under quarantine. In the later years, it was busy with medical devices to keep Dad comfortable, and Dad's soft chatter that amused them all.

All three of the boys seemingly left at the same time. Dad died, and Wesley moved out, and Greyson left for some fancy Ivy League education in America. And then it was just Phoebe and Mum.

"I'm not getting her a cat," Mum says back. "The last thing I need is something that will run into the streets and bring home viruses."

"It's a cat, Mum," Greyson says back. "Keep it inside and it will be just as clean as you."

"And I get to clean that litter box? No thank you," Mum scoffs. "You kids and your pets."

Greyson just smiles down at the ground, shaking his head. He approaches the steps toward the library and climbs them, one at a time.

"I have to go to my study group," Greyson confesses. "I will call tomorrow. Same time."

"You know I love your calls, darling," Mum sighs again. Greyson misses her smiles. Misses her laughter. "Perhaps I will pester your brother. He hasn't visited in a while, I worry Phoebe might forget what you boys look like."

"Just keep showing her photos," Greyson says back, pushing open the door with his hip. "Love you, Mum. Love you, Pheebs."

"Love you Grey!" his little sister exclaims from the background. "Call tomorrow!"

He hung up and strolls toward his table, offering a small smile. It's full to the brim. He's the last one to sit. Rowan, Luca, some of the tennis

team, and a couple of the robotics guys are all chatting about something that is identifiably not astrophysics. Greyson flops his textbook onto the table and sets his bag down on the floor.

“How’s Alice?” Rowan asks with a small smirk.

“Will you stop crushing on my mother?” Greyson shot back.

“I’m not crushing on her. She’s crushing on me. She loves me, Greysington.”

“She finds you as insufferable as I do,” Greyson murmurs.

“That’s very sweet, but I don’t like you like that,” Rowan hums, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Will you two quit it and talk to me about protons?” One of the other guys at the table demands, flipping open his textbook to Chapter 19.

The information is so incredibly dense with science-y terms that Greyson was not in the mood for understanding. Topics like protons, electrons, photons– they all blend into one word: something about light and astronomy. He doesn’t know. He groans as they re-read the same passage for what feels like the eleventh time about something in regards to particles.

“This doesn’t feel very 100-level Gen-Ed ,” Greyson complains. “I have a migraine just thinking about this. I wanted to learn cool things about the planets. Who gives a shit about light particles ?”

“If you were smart, you would come to the study group with a double espresso and some tylenol in your system,” Rowan comments, raising his coffee. Greyson huffs, looking over his shoulder at the cafe in the front corner of the library. Tempting. Very tempting.

“I say we adjourn for a coffee and pee break,” Luca suggests.

“Is that your way of saying you need to pee?” Rowan asks with a scoff.

“Perhaps. Or maybe I’m being considerate,” Luca shrugs, but without further bickering, stands and takes off in the direction of the bathroom. Greyson dug through his backpack for his wallet and stands.

“I’m getting coffee. Anyone need something?” Greyson asks. He’s met

with a chorus of ‘ *I’m good* ’ before he strolls away.

His eyes wander when he joins the line, scanning the tables full of students. He supposes, at a school like Brown, it comes to no surprise that the library is a common hang-out spot. They aren’t the typical University in the way that they chant sayings like “C’s get degrees” and give effort into their courses at the last possible minute. For the most part, most students here have been over achievers their entire lives, intelligent beyond compare, with astounding records and even more impressive futures. Doctors, lawyers, engineers in the making, all here because of some good grades and hard work.

Greyson finds it comforting, for the most part. That is, of course, until his eyes find a table of loud heathens that drive him mad.

They don’t clean up after themselves. Syrup drips from their coffee cups onto the tables, and their pastries sit on the wood grain without worry for germs. Everything is everywhere. They have no care for the fact that it’s a library— who needs volume control when you’re a football-er?

Greyson watches, though. Quietly, he studies the interaction. Liam, Bryce, Aiden, Cameron, and a handful of others are all sitting around the table. They seem comfortable and relaxed in their seats for the most part. Liam is practically shouting, spitting over the rest of them. Aiden is just as loud. There’s a mention of last night’s party, and it’s all downhill from there.

Cameron, once sat quietly, his eyes trained on a textbook, not reading it, was now the center of attention as Liam hurls threat after threat.

“And you get in my fucking way again? I’ll make you regret stickin’ around. I’ll make you regret comin’ fuckin’ home. You don’t push around a fuckin’ bear!”

Greyson folds his arms over his chest, studying Cameron’s reaction. He just nods. Quiet. What Greyson once mistook for calm content now seems like a placated silence. A threatened peace. He was as comfortable there as he would be on a bed of nails.

“You understand me, Cunningham?”

Cameron glances up. He makes eye contact with Greyson. Greyson wanted to look away, but his gut stirred. He couldn’t. He can’t turn his cheek. Greyson tries to direct Cameron’s attention to the table, just across the library, with Rowan sat at it. A safer, quieter, less violent

bunch. Cameron looks away, back to his friends, and just nods.

Greyson was next up to order, but in all honesty, at this point, he’s lost his appetite.

Chapter End Notes

There it is. The start of a shift. grey has a heart, and cam needs to gtfo.

Anyways, new chapter as promised :) This week is my last week working full time before the semester kicks off again! So, possibly, I will have more time to write. That being said, my best friend is having a baby in October, and I live with her, so I don't see myself having an abundance of time ever again haha. Regardless: chapters are always coming :)

Happy Sunday, folks. until next time.
-Hayl

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Face your fears.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson went a whopping two weeks without seeing Cameron again.

It was a blissful silence. His time was spent getting into the groove of the semester and with his friends. He's been enjoying it, for the most part; it's still early enough in the year that it's not quite cold yet, and late enough that the city isn't littered with tourists. There's actually a Fall-Festival about 45 minutes south from the city coming up this weekend, and with a plan to get away, eat some greasy dough boys and frozen lemonade, Greyson couldn't be happier.

He jumps to spike the volleyball back over the net, and he feels the impact in his knees when he lands. He didn't miss that feeling. It's been a little too long since he played— he spends summers playing on the beach with some locals, but the sand is far more cushioned than the hardwood basketball-gym floors. The ball touches the ground, and Greyson's team calls for 15. Greyson nods, resting his hands on his hips and lolling his head around his neck. He makes eye contact with Luca through the net and offers a smile.

"So," Greyson exhales, ducking under the net and strolling to him. "You coming Saturday?"

"Who else is going?" Luca asks back, guzzling some water into his mouth and flicking his sweaty hair out of his eyes. "You, me, Santiago… Rowan?"

"Why D'ya say it like that?" Greyson furrows his eyebrows. Luca flushes pink, and Greyson's eyes narrow. "Do you have a crush on my roommate?"

"Crush? Never. Interest? Absolutely," Luca shrugs. "Can you blame me?"

"Yes. I can. He smells and he will leave his socks everywhere if I don't remind him to clean up," Greyson mutters. "Since when? We've only

really been hanging out since the start of the semester-“

“Oh, come on,” Luca groans. “He’s one of those guys that people just see in passing and think…. *He’s pretty* ! I don’t know.” Greyson scoffs and shakes his head. “Like you never have your eyes on anyone.”

“Not really. People are gross,” Greyson frowns, plopping down onto a metal bench. “I play tennis, the one sport where I don’t directly contact anyone just about ever.”

“Just say you’re a prude and go,” Luca teases.

“Just say you have a fat crush on Rowan,” Greyson says back. Luca sips more water and scans the room around him— on the other side of the curtain is a half-court game of basketball, where Rowan is surely playing and losing miserably. Greyson wipes himself of sweat and exhales. “Yes, Ro is coming. He might end up bringing Cameron…”

“Oh, spicy.”

“You are so annoying.”

The game resumes, and Greyson is the one serving this time. He goes for a good-ol’ jump float serve, landing on his feet again and watching it soar over his opposite team’s head. It’s Luca who volleys it into the air again, and one of his friends who bumps it forward, a third guy attempting to spike over the net. One of their front guards dives to bump it, but it flies backward into Greyson’s grasp. He sets it upwards and forward, but it travels back to him again. He bumps it forward, and one of their spikers spikes it downward. It fails.

The interaction keeps going, back and forth and back and forth. Greyson hears the buzzer from the basketball game the next court over, and he feels eyes burning into his back. He sets it again and lets the front line try one more spike— it lands.

“Alright, I’m callin’ it for the day,” Greyson pants, wiping his sweaty hands on his pant legs. “I’m done.”

“Yeah, careful not to take out that knee again,” one of his friends jokes, clapping him on the shoulder. “Good game.”

A handful of them are also leaving— Luca plays for one more round. Greyson finds his stuff at the bench, conveniently sat beside a chatting Rowan and Cameron, drenched in sweat and pink in the face.

“That was cool,” Rowan comments as Greyson grabs his water bottle, chugging some of it down. “You really have to just think on your feet that entire game, huh?”

“I mean, it’s a science. Physics and calculations and all that,” Greyson exhales, digging through his bag for hand sanitizer. He doesn’t want to think about the amount of grime on that volleyball. “Kinda like football or whatever. When things change, you come up with stuff on the spot.”

“Did you just make a football similie?” Rowan gasps. “I am so proud of you! You’ve been listening to me?”

“I try to tune you out to the best of my ability-“

“I love you too, Greyson. It’s okay. You can tell me you love me.”

“I despise you,” Greyson says back, shouldering his bag. He glances at Cameron and gives a small, polite nod. He can’t help but notice the bruise has faded into his natural skin tone again. “How was basketball?”

“Awful. I got my ass kicked by dudes triple my size,” Rowan huffs. “Cameron included.”

“Not my fault you’re short and an easy target,” Cameron murmurs, looking down at the floor with a small smile. Greyson shifts from foot to foot uncomfortably.

“You’re supposed to be my friend.”

“And just… give you the three pointer? Not a shot,” Cameron scoffs. “You’re out of your mind.”

“Just once, I’d like it if you-“

“Cameron!”

All three of them look to the other end of the gym. Bryce, Aiden, and Liam stand together, glaring in their direction. Bryce nods Cameron over to join them. Rowan’s smile fell. Greyson goes back to getting ready to leave.

“C’mon, man! Let’s go!”

“Duty calls,” Rowan sighs. Cameron frowns, but nods. “See you Saturday.”

Cameron waited all week for Saturday.

Dorky as it sounds, he's always loved festivals, and moreso: he was eager to get a break from his housemates. He needed a day to feel like a person, rather than a "frat-bro", threatened into a personality of someone else's making.

He woke early that morning to hit the gym— get some good lifts in, a bit of a run, and approximately 20 minutes on a stairmaster before he was ready to keel over. He showers and changes kills time for a few hours with homework and hiding in the library to avoid his flatmates, until he's scheduled to meet everyone around 6:00 PM. It felt like the day was taking forever to end.

He strolls across campus and jogs up the stairs to Rowan's dorm, a smile broadening across his face when he finally reaches the door. He doesn't need to knock— it's already open.

"Gents," Cameron greets with a contagious smile. Four boys milling about the dorm room look up and greet him with smiles— Greyson gives attempt at one. "Who's playing carnival games with me?"

"I go nuts at the rubber duck game," Santiago jokes.

"You're on."

"Someone's happy today," Rowan teases, grabbing a jacket and throwing it over himself, grabbing his keys off his desk. "Let's go! Fair time!"

"Can I please get shotgun this time?" Greyson begs, jogging after them after shutting the door, checking it was locked a total of four times. "Ro."

"Bicker that one out with Cameron," Rowan responds. Greyson looks up at Cameron, who makes the briefest of eye contact. For a split moment, Cameron wants to duel him for it. Front seat goes to the tallest person there.

But then he thinks about the other day in the library. Greyson's sad eyes, and the way he tried to nod Cameron to safety across the library. The only moment that the two had been near one another in a capacity that was neither annoyed nor forced. A kindness that Cameron hadn't anticipated.

“Fine. Just this once,” Cameron relents.

“Yes! Thank you,” Greyson jogs ahead, stealing Rowan’s keys to go get to the car first.

Cameron sits in the back, with Santiago squeezed into the middle this time. Greyson seemed so comfortable and confident in his front seat spot— his phone automatically hooks up to the aux, and he’s buckled, and he’s talking with the others like he doesn’t have a care in the world. Cameron wonders if this is how everyone else sees him. Fun. Happy. Casual.

“—And I thought I hit rock bottom watching *Star Trek* with Greyson,” Santiago says with a chuckle, bringing Cameron back to attention.

“That *is* rock bottom,” Cameron tsks. “ *Star Wars* . Infinitely better.”

“You are so wrong it is insurmountable, ” Greyson argues from the front seat. “Luke Skywalker has nothing on Spock.”

“When *Star Trek* gets a wookie and an R2, I’ll give it a chance,” Cameron bickers.

“You mean the big hairy growling oaf? If I wanted more of that I would talk to Rowan.” Greyson rolls his eyes.

“What does Rowan prefer?”

“I’m a DC guy. I don’t care for the space shit,” Rowan shrugs, earning dramatic gasps from the passengers.

And the circles keep going. They talk themselves in round-a-bouts, around and around and around until they realize they’ve past their exit hundreds of times without ever noticing.

It’s a 45 minute drive from Providence to the beach that the Fall Festival would be taking place on. A few years back, 45 minutes was barely a blink of time. These days, it feels like forever. But for once, that forever was comfortable. Cameron wouldn’t complain if he spent forever smiling, laughing, joking with some people he enjoyed the company of (plus Greyson).

At the admissions booth, they pay their entrance fee and get their tickets to play games and go on rides. The five of them practically make a sprint for the first concession stands they see— dough-boys with some powdered sugar? Don’t mind if I do. The five of them mill

about together, watching the bright lights color an already sunny sky. The topsy-turvy rides that make Cameron want to throw up just watching it, and colorful ferris wheels that tip with every movement. He's never been much of a rides person– he just likes the ambiance.

"When I moved to America, this was the delicacy I was hoping for," Greyson jokes, taking a torn off piece of dough with his fork and taking a bite. He smiles up at Luca and over at Rowan and Santiago. A real smile. One that shows a person under his attitude.

"You have never had a good brisket then," Rowan says back. "You haven't lived until you've had brisket and cornbread from the south."

"Yeah yeah, southern pride. I'm perfectly content with this. Isn't fried food the epitome of America?" Greyson asks, shuffling forward, deeper into the crowds. "Maybe I'll get a corndog and be a disappointment to my mother."

"You already are," Santiago says, shouldering him as they walk on.

Music blasts overhead from speakers that stretch into the sky, and live music is being performed on the other end of the lot, vibrating the pavement as they stroll. Cameron is tempted to ditch, run up the dunes and to the beach that the festival sits beside, but he's stopped short when he finds himself at a pop the balloon stand.

They hop from game to game, food stand to food stand, and Cameron thinks this is the closest he and Greyson have ever been to *friendly* . Or, maybe take it a step further: the closest they've been to friends .

Too far?

Fall-Fest is easily one of the most overstimulating experiences a person can put themselves through. In every direction, there is screaming of every variety: children on rides, and babies who are tired, and toddlers who want ice cream, and adults who are definitely too drunk to be here right now. Strobing lights and swirling rides, thousands of people milling around all at once. Cameron hasn't experienced crowds like this since he lived in Florida and took a day trip to Disney. And while he loves Disney, and festivals, and energy… his brain is exhausted within minutes.

He shuffles at the back of the group, quietly taking it all in. A passive observer.

"You've been quiet," Greyson states from his right. Cameron hadn't

even noticed him slow to a stop, waiting for Cameron to catch up. "That's not like you. I'm used to begging for you to shut up."

"Just… taking a minute," Cameron shrugs, eyes scanning the sky that slowly fades from blue to orange. "Busy brain. Enjoying the moment."

"I didn't know you were a *Star Wars* guy," Greyson interrupts randomly. Cameron's face fell slightly. This felt weirdly personal, given their previous interactions. "Figured, y'know. Too nerdy and stupid for someone of your…"

"You think I'm an egotistical bastard," Cameron restates for him. Greyson shrugs. "I might not be your cup of tea, but I'm not that bad."

"You blame me?"

"Not at all," Cameron exhales. "But yeah. Me and my dad. I dunno. Surrounded by sisters, it felt like one of the few things we could bond over was nerdy stuff and football. Kinda cute. Kinda mind numbing."

"Could be worse, I suppose," Greyson shrugs. "My Dad called me Doofus as a nickname. His way of bonding with us was teasing us relentlessly."

"Smart man," Cameron shrugs. Greyson rolls his eyes. "I… I know you're not a fan. Of me, or… or my friends. But I swear I'm not as awful as they are. Maybe I suck by association, but I'm not them."

"You do suck by association. But so does Rowan," Greyson huffs. "Drives me crazy seeing you bend over backwards for people who will kick you down for no good reason."

"What other option do I have?"

"Infinitely better ones, like, I dunno…. Leaving the frat?" Greyson suggests.

"No."

"It's so easy to not surround yourself with assholes and yet you just insist upon being a victim, and wonder why I refuse to pity you."

"I don't need your pity, Greyson," Cameron shot back. "I don't need your support, your pity, or your apologetic watching from afar. All I ask is that we're civil so I don't anger Rowan again. At the bare

minimum, he deserves a good friend group, because he's always been a good friend to us."

"Fine," Greyson shrugs. "Gladly. Have fun with your meatheads."

Greyson walks ahead.

Despite the sour interaction, Cameron still has plenty of fun, though. He enjoys the outting, the opportunity to be away from his loud teammates and louder house. He's happy not being yelled at by Liam, and spending time with his best friend, and getting to know Luca and Santiago better. Unlike their friend Greyson, none of them are insufferable know-it-alls who feel so entitled to the world and everything in it.

Greyson has fun, too. They are civil all evening. His face lights up with the rides and colorful lightning. There's a fireworks show after sunset. They keep eating awful food and dancing to shitty music and Cameron watches them go on ride after ride. He wouldn't be caught dead in those stupid little topsy-turvy rides that make him want to throw up.

That is, of course, until Rowan is dragging him by the wrist to a ferris wheel with no escape plan viable.

"One ride. I promise. It will be so easy and painless."

"I hate you."

"One! You have so many unused tickets, just spend one ride with us. I'll even hold your hand," Rowan pleads, tugging him further forward in an already short line. It's incredible how few people want anything to do with a Ferris Wheel at a major festival. Too many other intelligent beings who value their life over the thrill, no doubt.

"If you do this one ride, I will do your laundry for a month."

"You don't even do your own laundry," Greyson scoffs. Rowan waves him off.

"I will beg on my knees if I have to."

"I will fall and die," Cameron says back.

"That's near impossible. Since when are you against the odds?" Luca teases. Cameron clenches his jaw, looking up at the spokes of death

and rocking carriages. He wonders how many people have died on one of these things, whether from heart attack, or falling, or some other wild cause.

Near impossible. Emphasis on near.

Cameron's whining and dragging his feet doesn't stop them from pulling him into the carriage with them. Rowan and Luca take up one half while Cameron is squeezed in the middle between Greyson and Santiago, for the mere fact that Greyson refused to have the middle seat. It's rocking before they even start moving, and Cameron shoots daggered glares at his best friend.

"This is horrific and I will die."

"Only if I'm lucky," Greyson says, propping his chin on his hand. "Oh, that's pretty. Look, the ocean is just over the sand dune."

"Yes, Greyson, that's how beaches work," Cameron huffs, digging his feet into the metal floor, only for the cart to rock again. Cameron swallows the lump in his throat.

"Fuck off," Greyson rolls his eyes.

"Boys, behave," Rowan quips. Cameron and Greyson both immediately direct middle fingers in Rowan's direction.

It's deserved. Because this is quite possibly the worst nightmare for both of them. Cameron, unsupported by much more than an unstable rocking chair hundreds of feet in the sky. Greyson, in close quartered spaces with several other people, in a seat thousands of people have sat in, unknown amounts of diseases in every surface he touches, and a bottle of hand sanitizer all the way in the car. Lord knows he would rather die than use a porta-potty sink.

"I think the only thing I hate more than you guys being dicks to each other is you guys pairing up to gang up on me."

"It's either you or him, take your pick," Cameron says, puffing out a breath and adjusting how he sat, only to instantly freeze as the seats dramatically rock.

"You puke on me and I will murder you," Greyson threatens.

"I'm not gonna fucking-"

“I don’t care if you don’t think you will– if you do, I am throwing you off this fucking cart and letting you splat on some poor toddler waiting in line.”

“Boys, I will put you both in a corner for time out,” Rowan says, half jokingly, half nervous by the tension.

They get to the top, and Cameron’s hands sit in his lap, folded together with white knuckled grip. His eyes focus anywhere but over the edge of the bucket-like cart they were sitting in. Down, or at his friends, or hell, he’d even take looking at Greyson over looking out He caught Greyson’s eyes a few times– Greyson seemed a little too enthusiastic by the sight of Cameron’s fear. A stupid little smirk took up the corner of his mouth, and his eyes get all squinty at the corners when he smiles or laughs, and his cheeks are pink from a breeze all the way up.

Cameron realizes he’s been focusing on him for too long and looks away again.

“You did it. Faced your fears,” Rowan encourages, nudging his foot. Cameron nods.

“This is awful.”

“C’mon, man. Look how beautiful it is,” Santiago encourages, nudging him, and making the carriage jostle slightly. Cameron bites his cheek with enough force to draw blood, but follows the direction of Santiago’s point.

Sure enough, the sight he’s been missing out on is incredibly beautiful.

The tides are coming in on the sand, and the sun is setting behind them, lower and lower and lower. The temperature drops as the sun does. Greyson shivers slightly to his right. Cameron is mentally patting himself on the back for remembering a jacket– the coastline is usually colder with the seabreeze. The clouds drift away and Cameron just knows it will be yet another crystal clear night. His shoulders relax slightly, and they all point and laugh as a surfer gets taken out by a wave down below.

It’s not the most comfortable of scenarios– his thigh pressed against Greyson’s, feeling every shiver, and hundreds of feet in the air with not even a seatbelt to keep him from falling to his death. Alas, he doesn’t regret coming.

Though, he does regret not packing another hoodie.

Chapter End Notes

Hi hi hi :)

My summer job is officially over, and I am officially free to be a person of my own outside of capitalism for a short period of time. I'm starting my senior year of university, so... here it goes. Wish me luck :) Keep an eye on my twt @hayloftown for an idea on when updates will come !

See you in the next one
-hayl

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A blessing and a curse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He's always loved classical music.

Boring, boring, he knows. But he does– truly. It calms him. Maybe it sounds ridiculous, but in high-stress situations, Cameron can often be found with his nose in a book with Chopin or Tchaikovsky, and as cheesy as it sounds, a lot of Mozart playing in his headphones. He should never be handed the aux cord and told to "shuffle", because half his music on his phone is pianists from all different periods, and maybe a little violin (though, violin is just for pleasure. Piano is for studying).

As much as he would love to give himself a pat on the back and declare that football got him into an Ivy League college, he knows better. He's intelligent in ways that no one expects of him. More than anyone likes to believe. He has always been smart for his age, too. He's always been the type of kid who could program his family computer to run games his parents had blocked. He could fix any blue screened laptop, take apart and put together a cell phone without instructions, and he, much to his childhood dismay, has perfect pitch. His talent for music was discovered early on– he's always been singing, plucking at his grandpa's guitar strings, clinking on piano keys, but it was his first piano lesson that they discovered his apt for musical talent.

He learned a full symphony in his first forty-five minute lesson. What was supposed to be teaching him scales and keys turned into a recital by the end, with Grandma in tears and his mother in shock. The instructor warned his family that they had a genius on their hands. That's rarely ever a good sign.

Sure his attendance looked atrocious. He was a truant child with an academic record of dozens of detentions, suspensions, and fights. Only one of his teachers would write him a letter of recommendation for any school, nevermind *Brown University* . The rest of them avoided

him like the plague. But despite it all, despite the atrocious reviews of him as a child, and the letters from his principal for all colleges to be wary of this student applying, no one could deny: he had a perfect GPA. An amazing 4.9. Every test he's ever taken came back beautifully aced. He turned in every assignment within the extended period of time he was often given thanks to his IEP. He wrote a beautiful senior paper, did incredible on both the SATs and ACTs, set the curve for the state standardized testing, sent in the most well written college essay any college could ask for, and those who did write him letters of recommendation? They sang him the highest of praises and urged the review board to take into account that his troubled actions never impeded his intelligence.

Among those people, one of which was a teacher at his high school. Her name was Mrs. Varden. Her letter of recommendation explained why colleges should look past his behavioral record and study his academic excellence, for he was a genius in the making. His therapist wrote a letter about how he's improved, and how it will show given time and separation from his family. And his piano teacher? She told the story of predicting his future as intelligent, capable, and terrifying.

It wasn't that he applied to Brown and simply got in. It's that his application drifted around, college to college, university to university. He had schools reaching out to him in an effort to recruit him. They wanted his intelligence. They wanted his skill. He not only had "perfect pitch" with piano. It's that he knew before it was ever taught. It went that way with every subject, not just piano. A student who knew the quadratic formula and how to solve it without ever attending an algebra class? A student who could read a sparks notes page and write the most beautifully written thesis on *To Kill a Mockingbird* in four days? A student who could listen to a piece of music and play it back without much else other than his memory?

He was personally invited to Brown on behalf of the music department, the English department, Mathematics, Science, Computer Science, all of the above. He got whatever he asked for. He won it all.

And here he sits, his mind in swirls, and his stomach doing flips. He doesn't know what's happening, or why, because for once, he doesn't know something. For once, he doesn't instinctively understand a topic.

Greyson.

He's confusing. He's unpredictable. There is no math or science in that mind. There is no logic in his fear.

His fingers hit the keys both aggressively and gently, drifting with his thoughts through hurricanes and beach breezes. He runs through fields of flowers and streets of London and yet he still doesn't understand it. Not at all.

The door to the music hall clicks shut, and he halts mid-song. Like a sudden bird squawking in the silent dewy morning, like a siren going off in the middle of a solo, like a child tugging on your sleeve.

Cameron closes his eyes and takes a full breath. He listens to the footsteps approach, followed by the plush sound of someone sitting in the front row of seats. He closes the cover and rests his elbows on the wood, resting his head in his hands.

"Go 'head," Cameron sighs. "Spill your truth."

"My truth is that you're acting weird," Rowan murmurs. Cameron huffs. "And I can't seem to figure out why."

"I'm in my own head. Happens a lot," Cameron murmurs. "Busy brain."

"Don't bullshit me," Rowan scoffs. "You can pull that with a lot of people. Sure. Mega-mind over here has a lot of thoughts. But something is bothering you, and I can't tell what."

"It's not bothering me," Cameron insists. "I'm just fine. I-I just need to figure some stuff out."

"You know," Rowan frowns, scooting forward in his seat. "Normal people talk about their problems. Or write them out to solve on paper."

"It's not the kind of thing you work out like your math homework," Cameron murmurs.

"And yet, here you are playing away your sorrows like you're being faced with the mathematical equation to explain the universe."

"It feels like I am."

"You have feelings?" Rowan smirks. Cameron groans. "Sorry. Sorry."

"It's fine." Cameron sits up straighter, looking over at him.

“Get back to playing, idiot,” Rowan sighs, standing and clambering up the stairs to join him on the stage. Cameron frowns, letting Rowan take a seat on the bench beside him. His best friend opens up the keys again, flicking through the music book and choosing a song for him– *Waltz* in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 64 Number 2 from Chopin.

Cameron doesn’t need to read the sheet. He glances up occasionally to check his pace, but otherwise, is perfectly comfortable in the warmth and chill of each twindle in the keys. He knows this dance perfectly well. Studied it over and over again, until his hands were raw and achy, and his brain felt like mush. He loves this one and it’s way to speed him up, make his thoughts iron themselves out, with a romantic undertone of desire and yearning.

He’s not sure why Greyson is the reason his head is swirling– why does he matter? Why does it matter why Greyson is the way he is, and what makes him so annoying, and why Cameron can’t help but want to know him a little more and more every time they’re near whilst simultaneously wanting to stay far, far away? Why does any of it affect him?

People are so different from textbooks. They are so much more complex than true versus false. They are neither right nor wrong. They just are. Greyson just is. And it’s infuriating. And confusing. And Cameron is just so interested in *why* .

“Why did you want Greyson and I to be friends?” Cameron asks, mid-note. Rowan sits in the question for a long few moments, bathing in the sound of rushing speed in music and quicker thoughts. He can’t keep up with Cameron’s mind.

He is far from stupid. Rowan, much like the majority of his university, is intelligent beyond comparison. He has been building computers since he was ten. He can envision strings of code in his head and perform them perfectly. He’s a math wizard and kinda okay at the Language Arts, too. But shit, Cameron never fails to startle him with his quick thinking and uncertain reactions.

“Because you’re my best friends,” Rowan says. “And I was… I was hoping if you two could get along, we… we could be a crew. And we are! We’re a crew. You, me, Greyson. Santiago and Luca too. We’re all a group, right?”

“Are we?” Cameron’s fingers fumble the keys, and he gives in. He lifts his hands after one missed note and takes a breath. Slow and steady ,

his piano instructor once told him. Everything needs to be quieter for you to be loud . “He’s a dick.”

“Did you get into a fight?”

“No!” Cameron groans. “He’s-He’s an asshole. And a know-it-all. He acts like he knows everything about me in a glance, and he gets in my head, and he does this stupid psycho-analysis bullshit that drives me up a wall-”

“Do you like Greyson?” Rowan gasps. Cameron scowls.

“Not a chance in hell,” Cameron spat back. “No. He’s getting under my skin.”

“Not in your sheets?” Rowan nudges him.

“Fuck off. No. I don’t do that,” Cameron sighs. “I-I can’t. You know I can’t. Not now. And definitely not with him.”

Rowan eyes him, up and down. Up. And down. And up again. Cameron stands and paces away from the piano. For once, music isn’t helping. The classics aren’t doing anything. He can still hear *Waltz* twiddling away in his brain, scratching at his skull and willing for him to finish it.

His fingers lock behind his neck, and he paces. Left stage to right, then back to left. He walks and walks and walks and his brain keeps wandering and his ears keep ringing with that same tune. His thighs can still feel Greyson’s pressed against it, and he can still envision his goosebump-coated skin. The way he smiled in the front seat of Rowan’s car, and the way he so seamlessly blended in when he was comfortable. How easy it was to make him comfortable. He’s an annoyance, a nuisance, and painfully right. Greyson is right, in that Cameron should just up and leave. He needs to get out of the frats– it’s not where he belongs. And hell, maybe he doesn’t belong in football either. The music department has been wanting him to do concerts and performances all four years, but Greek Life and his sport took up too much time, and he’s mortified to admit that part of him is delicate. Greyson is right, about everything. He’s right that Cameron is making himself into a victim, and not doing anything to fix it. He’s right that Cameron needs an out. And he’s right, that he’s not that bad. Cameron isn’t evil like his buddies. He’s in the wrong crowd, and he knows it too.

“I am a fucking coward,” Cameron murmurs. Rowan frowns. “And I

have no idea how to dig myself out of this one. Because Liam already wants me dead, and lord knows a handful of them follow his lead, and I can already see Aiden turning on me– dude, once Bryce joins Aiden's side, I'm dead. I'm gone. I came all this way to get out of trouble and I just keep starting it."

"You haven't started anything," Rowan insists. "Just… hey, man. We'll be fine. Just keep your head down. Stay out of trouble. Stick with us-"

"With Greyson?" Cameron scoffs. "Bury myself deeper? Last thing I need is an attack from both ends."

Rowan doesn't know how to respond to that.

He swallows the lump in his throat and looks down at his own fidgeting hands. He came here with the intention of talking about something else— debriefing on the next game, and if Cameron was going to the picnic on the quad, and if Cameron thinks it would be weird if Rowan asked Luca to go out, y'know, without the rest of the crew.

And here he is, instead, dissecting the one thing Cameron doesn't instinctively know and understand: emotion.

"It's a complex answer," Rowan sighs.

"You can say that again," Cameron puffs out in response, turning on his heel and pacing again. "I don't like Greyson. Not like that. Not at all. He's horrific, and-and a nuisance. He makes every waking breath miserable. But dammit, he's so-" Cameron looks to Rowan for help in finishing the sentence. Rowan isn't sure what he means. "Confusing."

His shoulders drop, and so does he. He sinks back down onto the bench and plops his head in his hands once more. They shake and twitch under the pressure of his skull. He fears the tremor may never go away, that his musical excellence is short lived, murdered by his anxiety and fear of freedom.

"No one teaches you how to feel things," Rowan murmurs, patting Cameron on the shoulder. "Nevermind how to figure out what you're feeling. So… I guess I can see why you're lost."

"My family is military. Feelings have nothing to do with thought. Feelings are a side quest," Cameron confesses. "Tears are for sissies. Romance is a weakness. Anxiety is in your head…" God, his head is pounding. If his parents could see him now… "And I have no idea

how to balance that with now. Because I've never had to deal with… with this."

"Liking someone?"

"Liking and hating someone all at the same time," Cameron grunts. Rowan holds his breath. "Fuck you, man… you did this to me."

"I'll… I'll take that blame."

Greyson curses his memory and all the pain it causes him.

He once sat in a psychologist's office, wishing to be diagnosed with a brain tumor, or an aneurysm, or a stroke. Something to explain his weakness and his headaches. He wants a reason for it all— surely, the world can be easily explained by science and medicine. That's how it's always been.

Greyson sat in that chair, staring down a woman, dissecting everything he has ever known and everything he will ever remember. Greyson is often accused of being a psychoanalyst, but he gets it from his psychologist, who spent more time watching and listening to him speak than she did diagnosing his problems. Though, he did have much to say. He was a young boy with an older brother and a terminally ill father. It was rarely ever his chance to talk about things he wanted to talk about.

Eidetic memory.

It's a blessing and a curse, truly. All he really needs to do is scan a book page and suddenly its in his head forever. It's a superpower, in all honesty; like his brain took a screenshot, and uses that to cheat on every exam for the rest of his life. He loves when it works for him, but other times…

Other times, he sits at his desk, looking at the few photos he has of himself with his father, remembering moment after moment of suffering.

Dad died young. Greyson recalls everyone saying that at the funeral, at least. It was the most people Greyson has ever seen in his life. He knew them all, one by one, but never all at once. Aunties, uncles, cousins, grandparents. Friends and friends of friends. People Dad went to school with. People he worked with before he got diagnosed. People he loved. People who loved him. Greyson met them all over

the years when they made their occasional visit, but he's never seen so many people packed into one room.

He recalls his mother's tight hold on his wrist, afraid Greyson might perish from a sniffle. She kept Phoebe at home, much to Greyson's sister's dismay. She shouldn't be exposed to this much virus.

Dad was too young to die. Merely 44 years old. Freshly 44. Greyson is already halfway to his father's full potential. Greyson is only two years younger than his father was when he received the diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis.

The diagnosis was not terminal in of itself. It wasn't pleasant, and it made for a lifetime of pain. But then the diagnosis kept coming. His body wasn't tolerating medications or treatments well. He was on chemotherapy to treat the lesions on his spine, but he rapidly lost mobility. He needed a liver transplant. He had prediabetes, then diagnosed as Type II Diabetic. His immune system never recovered after chemo. A common cold would hospitalize him with pneumonia. No risks. Dad used a cane, then a walker, then a wheelchair, then stuck to his bed. He got up and down. Progressive regressive. But all it took was one nasty flu, one little accident, and it was over.

Forty four. Died from the flu.

Greyson has sat in this chair for what felt like years, but in reality, was about twelve hours. He's petrified of leaving this room. The floor is flooded with diseases. He's religiously ate oranges and was about ready to drink purell, but it was no use.

Greyson was getting sick.

"Knocking, entering," Rowan greets from the door. Greyson swipes his sleeve over his face and nods, yawning. "Christ, you look like shit."

"I haven't slept," Greyson mumbles, staring at the final image of himself and his father. It was in hospice. Mum refused to get too close, afraid of getting sick, and even more scared of making Dad more sick. It was before Dad went on the ventilator. They were both smiling under their masks. "Did you get the-"

"Dayquil, your highness," Rowan hums, dropping a bag of goodies on the desk. "As well as cough drops, decongestant, sanitizing wipes for surfaces and hands, and some honey." Greyson huffs, watching Cameron shuffle in behind Rowan. "He's got a cold."

“Fun,” Cameron says, kicking his shoes off. “Can I-“

“Get a drink and chill,” Rowan agrees. “Help me with my homework.”

“I could have-“ Greyson began.

“You tell me the answers like a computer. At least this computer can explain the steps without reading off a mind-textbook,” Rowan scoffs, pulling his backpack onto his bed and waiting on Cameron to sit with him. There's an awkward silence between the three of them, none quite sure what to say in this moment.

A few weeks ago, Greyson might have bitched Cameron out. Maybe made Rowan feel like shit for inviting him over in the first place. A few weeks ago, Cameron would rather die than sit in the same room as Greyson.

A few weeks ago, Greyson shrunk into the center backseat, feeling completely out of control in a situation he desperately needed it. A few weeks ago, Cameron felt comfortable in a group of people for the first time.

A few days ago, they sat side by side, legs pressed together, Greyson chilled by wind but warmed by Cameron’s gaze. It was disgusting. It was… kind of incredible.

And now, they sit here. Once and for all, in this room together. This can either be spectacular, or go down in flames. Crash and burn. Greyson has a feeling he knows what direction it will go in. Cameron, on the other hand, couldn’t even make a guess.

“You ask Luca on that date yet?” Greyson decides to ask, looking back to the bag of sick-goodies and picking it apart. Rowan sputters, and Cameron’s attention shot up.

“Rowan!”

“It’s not a date. I just wanted to know if it's weird to hang out with him without the rest of us!” Rowan exclaims. “I-I’m not crushing, or going on any dates. Just-just hanging out with some friends. One on one time.”

“Mhm,” Greyson nods to himself, popping a cough drop in his mouth. “And you have no interest in Luca. Whatsoever. That’s absolutely why you chose to sit with him on the ferris wheel instead of us.”

“That’s not-”

Rowan’s phone buzzes on the desk. Their attention drifts to the device, then back at Rowan as he reaches for his phone. He plucks it up and his face flashes pink. Greyson shakes his head with a smirk, grabbing his water bottle and cracking a packet of dayquil.

“Loverboy…” Greyson snickers.

Cameron bites his cheek, watching Rowan delve into whatever text had consumed him. He can’t help but wonder if Greyson was right, if Rowan was in secret love with their friend. And he can’t help but wonder if Rowan was right: that Cameron’s complexities in his mind and the ideas of romance are so clouded that he can’t even tell whether or not he likes Greyson.

It’s all confusing, and Cameron doesn’t think he really wants to find out either way.

Chapter End Notes

NEW SPEAK OF THE DEVIL CHAPTER HMM???

I know many of you are reading both this and Read between the Lines, and I wanna say, I'm working on the next chapter for RBTL!! It's just a longer chapter so it's taking more effort but it is coming!! In other news: less than two weeks until my niece is born :) i'm unsure if I will get another chapter out before then, but here's hoping! life is hectic, trying to figure stuff out, so have patience with me pls.

Happy Tuesday, folks. ;)
until next time,
hayl

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

A fun chase, but a hard catch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“That is a horrendous idea.”

Midterms are right around the corner, and it felt like the semester was moving at lightning speed. Greyson has spent the past several weeks preparing for some god awful exams he knows will kick his ass, sitting in study groups for hours at a time, and doing his homework.

He hasn’t seen a social event since Fall Fest a few weekends prior, when the five of them drove across the state for a stupid little festival that pumped them full of grease and diseases. He was still reeling from a cold that got him, Luca, and Santiago all down for the count for a few days. His lungs still feel like they are lined with lead and mucus, and his head is still spinning thinking about the idea of being sick. His mother called seemingly hourly to check on him, too. He didn’t think it was possible for someone else to be more stressed about a cold than him.

“I wholeheartedly agree, Mum,” Greyson sighs, tapping his pen against the textbook with a low clunk . “But… I don’t know. I wanna be a good friend. I’m always the one that stays behind.”

“Baby, didn’t someone put their hands on you last time you attended one of these?” Mum whispers. Greyson frowns down at the textbook. “Why is this different?”

“It’s not.”

“Exactly. You have a big brain, my dear. That’s what got you into that fancy school of yours. I suggest you use it.”

“I don’t want to miss out on all my college experiences though just because I’ve bumped heads with a couple assholes. Pardon my language,” Greyson exhales, pinching the bridge of his nose. “My friends are gonna be there. I’m feeling better. I’ll be safe and stick to someone who will keep me in line.”

“Grey…”

Greyson closes his eyes and drops his head. It’s a rare nickname from her. His sister, sure. He’s used to it. She’s young, and she remembers just enough of her childhood to call him it. But Mum, and Wes… it doesn’t feel the same. Neither of them are Dad. Neither of them will ever be Dad. That nickname died out a while ago.

“I gotta go,” Greyson exhales. “Tell Pheebs I love her.”

“Honey-“

He hangs up, turning his phone off and rubbing his eyes. Promptly, the door swung open, and three boys spill through.

“Greysington!” Rowan announces. “You aren’t dressed? Why aren’t you dressed? We’re leaving in 10 minutes. You should be dressed.”

“I was talking to my Mum,” Greyson says back with a groan. “I think she’s more overbearing than I am.”

“Okay, and now you’re not talking to her. Let’s get ready to roll,” Luca claps. “C’mon. Dress to impress, hotshot. Whatcha got?”

“Nothing good,” Greyson shrugs, standing and digging through his closet. “Tee shirts. Jeans. Sweats. Sweaters. More tee shirts-“

“You are so fashionably helpless,” Rowan scoffs, shuffling in. “Uh… this, this, and this. Put it on. Wear your black converse. That’s an outfit.”

“That makes me look like an academia vampire,” Greyson murmurs.

“Because you are one. You’re at an Ivy League in New England. It doesn’t get more academia-vampire than this,” Luca mentions. “Change and join us in the hallway. Otherwise we’re dragging you out in your PJs.”

Greyson does as told, because he knows better than to doubt them— the door closes and he changes into the handpicked outfit with a mild grimace looking at his reflection. It looks like he went shopping in Luca’s closet— layered sweater and jeans, converse, and fluffing his hair. It’s not bad but it’s not his typical style. He swung his door open again and looks up at his friends with a scowl.

“I don’t do parties.”

“Now you do!” Luca hums, hooking an arm through his and tugging him forward. Greyson stumbles into line with them, letting his friends gas him up over the good appearance. It's amazing what happens when he doesn’t wear his comfort clothes.

They walk to the frats instead of driving— it’s not all that far, and they can hear the music before they turn onto the road. Delta Phi is lit up with colorful LEDs that sync up to the music that shakes the asphalt from a block away, and there’s a block party worth of people on just the front lawn alone. Greyson’s gaze lowers, and instinctively, he traces a hand over his face.

“Stick with us and you will be just fine,” Rowan promises, patting him on the back. “Buddy system or whatever.”

“Yes, that’s a brilliant idea. I wish I thought of that before,” Greyson murmurs sarcastically. “You know how I feel about parties.”

“Two hours, and we’ll leave,” Rowan promises. “Hell. If you guys really hate it, just pair up and tell me you’re gonna go. Just don’t get caught up on your own.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Greyson sighs. “I’ll last twenty minutes.”

They walk into the party and go unnoticed. Greyson easily hides in the crowd by disguising himself amongst Luca and Santiago, who were just as amazed by the craze of the event. There is something rather beautiful about how disgusting frat parties are— the most complex cultures on a big ol’ petri dish. Greyson hesitates to even take a water bottle, uncertain on if grimy hands have already touched it.

They can barely hear themselves talk over the music. The vibrations churn in Greyson’s stomach. He looks around and just imagines how terrified all this would make his mother. The risks of this scenery— bullying, and germs, and assault, and American’s. It’s Mum’s worst nightmare.

Being at parties like this makes Greyson feel like his brother. A disappointment to Mum, and his history, and very, very gross. Pretending to be someone he isn’t.

He hasn’t talked to Wes in a while…

“Hello hello,” Cameron greets, sliding into the group of the four of them. He offers Rowan a drink. “If I knew you were all coming, I would have grabbed you all a beer.”

“How rude of you,” Santiago murmurs with a teasing smile. “I need to drink to survive this kinda thing.”

“Easy. I will be back. Luca, Greyson, drink?” Cameron offers. Greyson shares a look with Rowan, who gives him a small nod.

“Sure,” Greyson swallows the lump in his throat. “Surprise me.”

“I’ll go with you to pick something out,” Luca offers. Cameron nods and walks away with him. Greyson shrinks slightly into Rowan and Santiago, eyeing the crowded kitchen as Cameron and Luca weave through bodies.

“Look at you. Big steps. I’m proud,” Rowan claps him on the shoulder. “Loosen up. A drink might help with that.”

“I’m just hoping Luca will be top heavy on the mix,” Greyson sighs. He glances around again and has the misfortune of meeting Bryce’s eye. He instinctively looks down again, stuffing his hands into his pockets and rocking on his heels. “Here comes trouble.”

“What do you-“

“Hello hello,” Bryce greets, saddling up with Rowan. “Didn’t expect you to bring friends, Ro. I’m impressed.”

“I’ll be even more impressed if the guys can behave long enough for them to stick around,” Rowan says back. “Think you can help with that?”

“With what? Reeling in Liam?” Bryce scoffs. “I dunno. Two parties in a row with him. Between Greyson and Cameron… I think this is a recipe for disaster.”

Greyson bites his cheek and stays quiet. He feels Bryce looking at him though. There’s more conversation between the two— Rowan calling in a favor to just keep Liam away from his friends, and Bryce promising to not ignite any fires. Bryce walks away with one spared glance at the silent Brit who otherwise can’t help but make some noise. Bryce doesn’t think he’s ever seen Greyson so quiet.

Cameron returns a few minutes later, Luca in toe, with three more drinks. Greyson accepts his solo cup, giving it a sniff— he’s met with a concoction of aromas, featuring fruity sugars, pungent alcohol, and a little bit of juice. A mixing straw was thrown in too. He takes a sip and nods to himself.

“Not bad,” Greyson compliments.

“That might have been the kindest thing you have ever said to me,” Cameron says back. Greyson rolls his eyes. “I’ll have you know, everything was also prepackaged in a way to prevent contamination. Figured your OCD-brain might appreciate that.”

“I don’t have OCD,” Greyson groans.

“No, just obsessive ritualistic habits. Definitely not OCD,” Rowan rolls his eyes. Greyson elbows him in the ribs. “Am I wrong?”

“Yes. Very. I’m neat, not obsessive.”

“Sure,” Cameron scoffs. “Regardless, your drink. It’s the best one you’ve ever had, yada yada yada-“

“I didn’t-“

“Give me the compliment and move on, c’mon.”

Greyson huffs and takes another sip.

The party keeps moving, and eventually, the group splits up. Greyson sticks with Santiago, who seemingly settles into the crowd fairly easily. Greyson, who once found Santiago to be more similar than different, no longer recognizes his friend as he steadily becomes more outgoing and lively. He is the life of a party neither of them even wanted to go to in the first place. He was becoming a shadow of his friend, moving where he moves, silent, unspeaking, faceless. He scans his surroundings in search of a better comfort, a calmer presence.

When he parted ways with Santiago, he joined Luca. He’s been wherever Rowan goes most of the night. The pair seem to eye each other frequently, laughing at each other's jokes. They’re definitely tipsy. Luca is winning people over pretty quickly, too, but he’s definitely still dorky enough to be an outsider to the primary problem people— Bryce, Aiden, and Liam.

Luca and Greyson go in to mix up another drink. Luca tries his best to recall what Cameron put in it— top heavy on the rum, some of the blue curacao, and other sweet mixtures, and adding a little more rum with whatever room was left over. Luca grabs himself a seltzer, nudging Greyson.

“Doin’ okay?”

“Ready to go home, but otherwise, yeah,” Greyson shrugs. He glances over his shoulder, finding the trio already looking at them. “We should go back toward Ro.”

“Why do you-“

“Please.”

Luca follows his eyes and just nods, casually starting toward Rowan again, who was stood on the back porch. Greyson can feel the pressure of eyes on the back of his head. He takes a swig of his drink— it’s much stronger than the one Cameron made, and he gets a full mouthful before he hears his name from behind them, called out just loud enough for Greyson to hear. He walks faster, only for a hand to grab his elbow. He winces.

“Can I borrow you for a second?” Cameron asks, suddenly appearing over Greyson’s shoulder, making him jump. Luca glances over his shoulder, making eye contact with Cameron, then at Greyson. “I’ll make it brief.”

“Why?”

“Just… five minutes,” Cameron insists. Greyson shifts uncomfortably, catching Luca’s eyes. His friend nods. Luca has a faith in Cameron that Greyson didn’t. “Thank you. C’mere.”

Greyson guzzles the last of his drink as he follows Cameron in a weird pattern around the house— they cut through a dining room and a study space to avoid the hallway and living room, going up a back staircase up to the second floor, and through the first door on the left. Greyson holds his cup for comfort, his head buzzing with an energy (and exhaustion) that wasn’t here half an hour ago.

“What’s the play?” Greyson asks as his back settles against the now closed door. “Got me alone so you can… throw a hit? Kick me down? Get something humiliating out of me to-“

“Aiden and Liam were planning something and I needed to get you away from there,” Cameron says back, interrupting him. Greyson’s eyebrows furrow. “They were waiting for an opportune moment to get you in a bad spot and- I don’t know. I saw them watching and knew it was now.”

“ *Now* ,” Greyson repeats, arms slowly folding over his chest. He makes eye contact with Cameron, cocking his head to the side. “Why

are you helping me?"

"Why do you want me to be a bad guy so badly?" Cameron asks back, exasperated. Cameron paces away and sits on the edge of a bed, frowning. It's uncomfortable in this bedroom– two beds, stuff on the floor, pictures, trophies, all these pieces of life. They are far too close. They are far too quiet. Greyson's chin tips up in an effort to look up at him with confidence, rather than the building nerves in his gut. Alone in a room with someone he trusts about as far as he can throw. This is a nightmare. "I'm trying to help you."

"I'm fairly certain it was you who said…" Greyson clears his throat. " *I don't need your pity* ."

"Yes, you do," Cameron fought. "Because without it, your head would be bashed in against the bricks of my house, and I would be the one cleaning up the mess. So do me a favor and… and just sit your ass down for a few minutes until it's safe to get you out of here."

"Get me out of here," Greyson parrots.

Greyson isn't intimidated, per se. He isn't easily scared by people bigger than himself. He is sure as hell not scared of Cameron. But that being said…

There he stood. Greyson's back propped against the door, arms crossed over his chest, Cameron sitting on the edge of his bed, out of breath, maybe a little sweaty, and fidgeting like a four year old told to sit still.

Greyson looks around the dark room and frowns. He finally gives in and gingerly sits at the edge of the desk chair to his left. He's careful not to touch anything, and he tries to fixate his eyes on a blank wall, or a window, or anything that is decisively not Cameron .

"If you wanted to get me alone so bad, you could have at least got me a drink first," Greyson huffs, shrinking in the chair with his arms shut. "I feel like a hostage."

"You can either be a hostage or the victim of a hate crime. Up to you," Cameron said back. "Be my guest."

Greyson scowls, but continues to stare off. Cameron stands and paces, seeming just as stressed about this situation as Greyson is. Eventually, through, he settles upon opening a closet and pulling out a glass jug– Greyson furrows his eyebrows at the sight of a handle of New

Amsterdam.

“Why on Earth do you have vodka in your closet?”

“For moments like this, when a shot sounds more tolerable than silence,” Cameron murmurs back. They make brief eye contact. Greyson can’t even pretend– a smile breaks out across his face, followed by an incredulous laugh. Cameron raises an eyebrow and holds out the handle.

“In any other situation, I would rather die than share a drink with you,” Greyson forewarns. “But if I wanna survive this-”

“Atta boy,” Cameron smirks. Greyson holds out his cup and lets Cameron pour him a double shot. Cameron paces to the desk Greyson sat at and grabs a mug off of it– the mug is branded with the image of a dolphin– and he peaks inside to check it’s cleanliness before pouring himself a shot of his own.

“You don’t have a chaser by chance, do you?” Greyson assumes.

“Not at all.”

Greyson sighs, looking at the cup again and nods. Fair enough. He should have anticipated something like this.

The two meet their cups in the middle with a *cheers* – Cameron’s ceramic mug and Greyson’s plastic cup, and they down their double shots with a grimace and a groan. Greyson’s face twists up for a moment in disgust, and Cameron coughs a few times, only to pour out another. Greyson holds his cup out too.

“We are on the same page about something,” Cameron snickers.

Greyson was already buzzed, but it doesn’t take long for the straight-vodka to push him into a drunken delusion, like a rapid descent into madness. He looks to Cameron’s hand, his fingers curled around the glass handle, letting the liquid ooze out in a surplus of a traditional shot. They should have brought water with them into their nuclear-bomb shelter of a hiding spot. Alas, the vodka will have to do. It’s like Cameron is glittered with a dust of radiant energy, like he no longer had the devil horns and a tail. Another *cheers* . Another drink. Their cups hit the desk and Greyson wipes his hand across his mouth.

“That is rancid,” Greyson sputters slightly. “I like my drinks fruity and sweet.”

“Really? I figured you’d like them bitter and painful,” Cameron smirks to himself.

“You’re bitter and painful.”

“Mhm. Another?”

“Yes.”

They pour out one more, but they let it sit there for a moment between them. Greyson scoffs.

“This is… so stupid,” Greyson exhales, standing from the chair. “That I’m hiding in your bedroom, drinking my sorrows away in hopes of having a slightly less miserable time.”

“Are you?” Cameron proposes, cradling his mug to his chest as Greyson goes back to leaning against the wall. They share a look– glittered and warm. A connection that wouldn’t exist without their partnered buzz and disparity.

“Finish this and I’ll find out.”

One more *cheers* and a gulp. It burns going down, and Greyson is sick of the taste. He wants a chaser– a lemon, a spoonful of sugar, something sour or salty to distract the taste of burning, sharp metal cutting down his throat.

Cameron’s nose crinkles.

“I think that was the worst one,” he coughs out into his elbow. “That was rough.”

“It was.” Greyson agrees. “Come here.”

“What do you-”

“I need to get that taste out of my mouth. Come here.”

Cameron furrows his eyebrows but instinctively follows directions. Perhaps Cameron would act as a bodyguard as they go to the bathroom for water, or maybe he would task Cameron with finding something to snack on, or maybe he would–

Greyson’s hand grabs a fistful of Cameron’s collar and yanks him down. Cameron catches himself on the wall and meets him midway.

It's a series of thoughts racing through his head:

1. Will this actually help get rid of the taste of vodka if they were both drinking it?
2. Cameron realizes he didn't brush his teeth today
3. Greyson just kissed him
4. Cameron, just a few days prior, was running in circles around his piano, wondering what the hell he would do about the Greyson situation, and somehow it got all that much more complicated
5. He is kissing Greyson.

Cameron doesn't push away. He doesn't break the kiss first. He doesn't try to stop it, and he feels the buzz of the liquor hit him like a cement truck barreling at him at top speed.

Greyson isn't entirely sure what he's doing and why. He just knows he doesn't mind it.

Cameron is taller than him, by quite a few inches. Broader, too. He has the athletic build of a football player, and Greyson has the athletic build of a runner. Lean. Thin. A fun chase, but hard to catch. They break for a breath, and neither of them seem to pull away at first.

"You're real close, Cunningham," Greyson murmurs.

"Says the bastard that just kissed me, Hampton," Cameron says back breathily.

"You kissed back."

"Shut the fuck up," Cameron shot back, Greyson breaking out into a tipsy smile as Cameron pressed him back against that wall again, Cameron stands there, looking between Greyson's glassy, dark eyes, listening to the distant music, feeling every missing inch of space between them. Greyson seems so calm and collected, but his racing pulse under Cameron's fingertips say otherwise.

"You gonna kiss me? Or just stand there drooling?" Greyson whispers, looking between Cameron's mouth and his eyes. This is definitely the alcohol talking. Maybe he went too heavy on the rum. Maybe the shots caught up to him quicker than expected.

Cameron has had better drunken ideas— drunk hookups with girls who won't get him in trouble, and messes he'll clean up in the morning, and picking fights he shouldn't. This was probably his worst

one yet.

And here he was, giving in. Crashing his mouth against Greyson's, tasting the blue curacao and pineapple on his tongue, pinning Greyson's body against the door. Melting as Greyson's arm wound around his neck, pulling him in. Lathering himself in what must be the best drunken kiss he's ever had in his life. Not sloppy, or wet, or mushy. Half-baked, warm, sweet.

Greyson grins as Cameron presses him firmer against the wall, and tugging on the loose waves at the base of Greyson's skull. Greyson slips his fingers through Cameron's belt loops and pulls his pelvis forward.

"This is reckless," Cameron whispers between kisses, sweeping a hand down Greyson's ribcage and slowly dipping under the hem of his shirt. "Very reckless."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Greyson murmurs despite reconnecting their mouths.

Cameron's hand is on his waist, fingers digging into his skin. Greyson bumps with the door, taking a sharp breath as Cameron's knuckles are the only protection between his skull and the frame. A tongue slips between his lips. Greyson melts forward. Small gasps and pants for breath are the only noises from them. They are uninterrupted by the pounding music from a floor below them, making the floors and walls vibrate against their weight. Greyson tufts the hair at the base of Cameron's neck, rocking back on his heels again. Chest to chest, anxious for a deeper, more meaningful touch, Cameron is desperate to feel something.

Greyson lets the arm around Cameron's shoulders loosen, and his hand passes down Cameron's spine, feeling his body squirm when his hand gets lower. Cameron is ticklish, Greyson realizes, smiling to himself. He traces his fingertips over Cameron's waist, and the man jumps slightly, and all the muscles in his torso contract. His arms swell with a slight tension, too. Cameron presses Greyson back firmer, taking hold of his jaw.

"Don't do that," Cameron whispers shakily. Greyson's hand hovers rather than touches, looking up at him with raised eyebrows, pressing his chin into Cameron's hand. "I will squirm like a bitch."

"Maybe that's the point," Greyson murmurs, his fingers twitching slightly against the fabric. "I can stop if you *really* want me-"

He's shut up with another kiss, and Greyson smiles grander. He presses Cameron away from the wall, letting the footballer stumble them blindly toward a bed. Greyson prays it's Cameron's own, and not his roommates. Greyson hasn't even taken a moment to truly survey the space he was occupying– was this even Cameron's bedroom? Did he even live in the fraternities, or did he live in a dorm? Greyson realizes he doesn't know a damn thing about the man he was currently going to second base with.

Cameron sinks down onto the edge of the bed, pulling Greyson with him. One of Greyson's knees rests against the mattress, and his left leg stands between Cameron's. Cameron's hands have started wandering their own paths, similar to Greyson's. Down Greyson's waist, and across his hips. Up his abdomen and over his ribs. A trembling touch along the hem of his shirt, pressing upwards. Greyson cranes into the touch, rather than away. Cameron's confidence skyrockets as Greyson searches for Cameron's hands wherever they go.

His skin is so soft, Cameron notes. Like lamb's ear. Like silk. Like the slightest scratch would have him bleeding out. Cameron wonders how the hell he's taken the hits he has, now knowing how fragile he felt.

Greyson certainly was ticklish, too, despite his cocky attitude. He was playing it off well until Cameron's nails traced along his hip and his body suddenly twitched without warning. Greyson tries to play it off, and thus, Cameron does it a second time, watching as Greyson's knees go weak under him. More weight is rested on the mattress, and Cameron uses it as an excuse to pull Greyson atop of him. Straddling Cameron's waist, Greyson loses all sense of superiority, and Cameron loses all his nerves. They settle into a routine they both had, but never with each other. Like a match made in heaven, they puzzle together like they've done it a thousand times.

Like Hell itself froze over, both of them smile together. At one another. With one another. Greyson smiles, a small giggle slipping from his mouth when Cameron dares to trace his hip again . Cameron, smiling at the sound of Greyson's giggle. He has a pretty laugh. Cameron is unsure if he's ever heard it before. He's unsure if he's ever witnessed a genuine smile from the man who is typically so… cold and bitter.

"Just sex," Greyson murmurs into Cameron's mouth hesitantly, as half their clothing is discarded elsewhere. Cameron nods frantically.

"Yeah, no doubt," Cameron mumbles back, hooking an arm around

Greyson and flipping him to his back, Greyson yelping and cackling out a laugh at the sudden switch. Pinned to the mattress, he welcomes Cameron's kisses against his throat, his shoulder, his collarbone, his chest. Articles of clothing land in heaps on the floor that were damn near indistinguishable from the ones that were already there. Greyson lets out a breathy moan at Cameron's mouth on his abdomen, lifting his hips anxiously.

Just sex.

How bad could it be?

Not very, if you were wondering.

Downing their exhaustion and drowning their guilt, the two pass a handle of New Amsterdam between one another. In Greyson's humble (and very correct) opinion: it's fucking awful. But he is more than willing to kill the germs flooding his mouth and esophagus with shitty vodka. Cameron, on the other hand, doesn't mind the taste, so long as it makes him feel less sinful and grimy. If he forgets the feeling of Greyson's hands, and the way he laughed, perhaps he will never want them again.

Drinking only makes them laugh more, though. Because Greyson's head falls against Cameron's thigh when he collapses into a fit of giggles, and Cameron can't help but laugh with him, tangling his fingers through the dark waves, even if he doesn't know what they were laughing about. Each sip sucks, and Cameron regrets not restocking his minifridge with something to chase, but Greyson's tongue will have to do.

If they weren't swigging the bottle, they were kissing, or laughing, or both. Greyson's laughter just gets prettier the longer he goes. And Cameron just gets prettier the longer Greyson sits there, laughing with him. If Greyson drinks enough, he won't have to wonder if Cameron washed his hands before they started all this. If he drinks enough, he won't wonder the last time Cameron washed the sheets they just screwed on. If he drinks enough, Greyson won't wonder if Cameron is still the grimy brute that he so often is elsewhere. Surely the alcohol killed any potential germs left by his tongue.

Nearing midnight, they sober up enough to dress themselves. Greyson's hands are shaking, which makes Cameron snicker and shake his head, scooting toward the edge of the bed and reaching out to help button his jeans, loosely tucking the front of Greyson's shirt into his

pants, pulling on it to make it look natural.

“How bad is it?” Greyson asks through giggles, turning and looking for a nonexistent mirror in Cameron’s bedroom. “You got no mirror?”

“I’m not a self centered prick who looks at myself all day,” Cameron murmurs back, smiling on as Greyson tries to use the window for his reflection. Cameron reaches out, catching his belt loop. “C’mere.”

“You didn’t answer my question, you lug.”

“I’m going to,” Cameron insists, hooking his fingers into Greyson’s waistband, pulling him closer. Greyson stumbles toward him, and smiles, letting Cameron catch him for a warm, open mouthed kiss. Greyson’s hand laces through Cameron’s hair all over again. He considers kicking the jeans off again. Cameron retracts away, barely an inch. “You… look very attractive.”

“Attractive enough to sleep with some boy at a party? I was hoping to come out of my shell tonight,” Greyson murmurs back, making Cameron snicker. “My hair is a mess, isn’t it?”

Cameron pulls away more, and his quivering smile says it all. Cameron reaches up in an effort to help fix it, whilst Greyson tries to find Cameron’s pants so he can go back out. Drunken, handsy, and giggly, the two act like they’ve been around one another all their lives. Greyson forgets his dislike of the man he slept with. Cameron forgets his annoyance with the man who just gave him the best time of his life.

“One more for the road,” Cameron says with a slight lisp, taking a swig from the cap of the handle and passing it off to Greyson. He guzzles straight from the lip with a grimace, doing a swift swish around his mouth, and capping it. Greyson grabs the jacket off the chair to shrug over his shoulders.

Cameron is the one to give the all clear to leave. Cameron walks out first, and Greyson hovers for a moment before stepping out, too. Greyson plays it off like he was waiting for the bathroom, and Cameron stumbles his way down the stairs. Greyson doesn’t even wonder– he already knows he won’t be seeing Cameron again before the night ends.

Greyson gets into the bathroom when it empties and drunkenly fixes his appearance, steadily regrouping himself into something more presentable. Neater hair, shirt tucked properly, shaking off his jitters.

He hopes to god the hickey on his collarbone isn't that noticeable in the dim lighting.

Back downstairs, he finds his group of friends all drunken and laughing. Greyson fits right in. They stick a drink in his hand and tell him to get drinking, and Greyson plays along. Sure. Wash the bad taste out of his mouth that he just royally fucked up.

Luca's arm gets thrown around Greyson's neck, and they're all laughing together. Greyson buries his face in Luca's shoulder when they start teasing him for getting drunk. He sinks into the warmth of drunken fun and friends.

They don't stay much longer— they leave shortly after midnight, and they stumble their way home with loud laughter to wake the neighborhood. The dorm hallways are just as loud with similar energy– drunken students stumbling toward their beds and being harassed by the RA on duty who just wants to sleep.

"I am blown away ," Rowan scoffs out as Greyson settles into their room, discarding his shoes by the door blindly. "That you stuck out the entire night. Where the hell did that come from?"

"Take enough shots and you'll get over any of your grievances," Greyson hums. "Can't complain too much."

"No?" Rowan smirks, looking him over as he laid a jacket over the end bedpost. "That's… that's great, man. I'm impressed."

Greyson crashes immediately– changing into something comfortable and hitting the mattress with a huff. Rowan watched him stir until he settled. His back rose and fell with every breath, and Rowan sat back, staring at the jacket on the end of the bed.

It was a little big on him. And it most certainly was not a jacket Greyson wore into the party. He's not sure of the owner– it's just a regular hooded jacket a few sizes too big. But Rowan eyes his best friend and the bed post, over and over and over again, wondering where the hell his friend ran off to in that hour apart-- wondering what kind of double life Greyson could possibly be living.

Chapter End Notes

So...

Me and chapter nine. We have a history.

Things have just turned on their head. Big time. Everything is about to get a WHOLE LOT more complicated. Who's excited for the confusion of a fwb relationship meets enemies who want nothing more than to see one another perish? This is exciting. I'm excited.

Also, for those of you keeping track of the Hayl-Lore: my niece was born last night! 9:09 PM, a head full of hair, a beautiful little face, and both momma and baby perfectly healthy. Welcome to the world my lil Pumpkin

As always: to keep up to date with when updates are coming (and hayl-lore) follow my twitter @ hayloftown.
hayl

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

You've made your bed, now lie in it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson spends the next week pretending it didn't happen.

Nobody knew but him and Cameron. Nobody had any idea what happened between them– as far as anyone knows, Cameron just pulled Greyson aside to ask a question, Greyson was gone for an hour, and all of a sudden came back happy as a clam. Nothing off putting about that.

Right?

Right.

Greyson carries on as normal. Because he is. Normal, that is. All is normal. Everything is as-is. Everything is fine.

It's been a week since Cameron and Greyson crossed paths, and their lives were just swell. Maybe a little tense as they interact with their friends and family, who all identified something being different about them, but otherwise, perfectly seamless from prior to their drunken encounter. Greyson stays away from liquor and the frats, and Cameron stays away from Rowan's dorm room, and they're good! Perfectly, inconsequentially fine.

The door to Cameron's study room, reserved in the university library, swings open, making him jump. He looks up from his laptop to make eye contact with his best friend who he may or may not be avoiding right now.

"What did you do?" Rowan asks through grit teeth, kicking the door shut behind him to lock them both into a small, secluded space. Cameron bites his cheek. "You're being weird. We were doing great– you came to all the hang outs and everyone was getting along then all of a sudden you're ghosting us. What did you do? What's going on?"

"Nothing," Cameron lies through his teeth. "I'm just busy."

“Bullshit.”

Cameron swallows the lump in his throat.

“If you were busy with class, you would show up to the study group. You ignore me during and after practice. You aren’t busy. You’re avoiding us.”

“I can’t be around Greyson.” He blurts out before he could stop himself. Rowan recoils. Cameron’s breath catches, and he tries to rapidly find something to clean up the truth he just spilled. Rowan slowly sinks into a chair across from him. “The-the guys already want me dead. I’m on thin ice. If they put together that I’m spending time with your group of friends, with Greyson , I’m screwed. I’m done for. I will get my ass handed to me.”

“Since when are you scared of Bryce ?”

“Since I got punched in the fucking face and no one backed me up!” Cameron huffs. Half truths. Stick to half truths. Because none of this is a lie– he’s just missing one, itty bitty detail. Minute, really. Completely unimportant to the conversation.

“ *We* had your back!” Rowan exclaims. “Hell– even Greyson had your back. Do you know how much Greyson has to hate someone to change his mind? I think the very reason Greyson doesn’t complain about you anymore is because you are on their shitlist too. When are you going to get it through your thick skull that you are a jester in their stupid kingdom. They will execute you at the first chance they get.”

“Unless I play along,” Cameron argues. “If I stick with them, I don’t get killed, and if I-”

“If you stick with them, you just suffer longer before they finally get you. If you leave, you get it over with and move on -”

“It’s not as simple as you make it out to be.”

Cameron runs a hand over his face. They sit in silence across from each other, Rowan’s hands folded in front of him. They’re both stirring in their thoughts and emotions. They’re both tangled in this– Cameron, for sleeping with Greyson– a stupid mistake, really. They shouldn’t have done it. If they hadn’t, they would probably just go right back to hating one another and everything would be fine. And Rowan– for being Greyson’s roommate and Cameron’s best friend. He’s in the middle of all this without even knowing.

“We talked a few weeks back. In the music hall,” Cameron reminds. Rowan nods slowly, arms folded over his chest, looking smaller than usual. Looking like a child of divorce. Looking like the rejected little brother. “Keep my head down. Stick close to you. And I just… I know I’m getting too close. I know I’m going to cause trouble. There’s already a mess with the guys because I brought you guys a fucking drink at a party. I can’t… I can’t let it get further than this.”

“You can’t be seen as a decent human being,” Rowan responds with a roll of his eyes. “You gotta keep up the asshole appearance. Got it.”

“Ro…”

“No, no, you’re good. You’ve made your bed, you can lie in it,” Rowan reassures, standing. “Good luck. Have fun playing the part. Until you decide to man the fuck up, though, I’m going to go enjoy some time with my friends, who care about me, and who don’t pressure me into being a dehumanizing prick.”

Cameron watches him leave with a frown. He doesn’t bother arguing– Rowan is easily one of the most stubborn people he knows, and also, unfortunately, the most caring. Rowan will always lean in the direction of those with soft hearts and kind souls. Cameron is unsure what his are like these days.

He finishes his homework in the library, both to buy time before he has to be home, and to make sure that it’s all done before he goes back to a loud house where he can’t hear himself think. He walks home with his hands stuffed in his pockets and earbuds popped in his ears, keeping his head down and trying to stay out of trouble, just like Rowan told him to do. Not quite how Rowan intended him to, though.

He stops into a coffee shop to grab something to drink– some little local chain called Providence Bagels. It’s filled to the brim with college students studying or going on coffee dates, hipsters who think they’re too good for Starbucks or Dunkin’, and an elderly couple cheers-ing their bagel sandwiches. His gut swirls, realizing he will never have that. An elderly romance that is tied together by brunch dates and soft morning smiles. He will never have that love that others manage to create for themselves.

He folds his arms over his chest, staring off at the menu above the heads of the people at the counter.

“Mum-” a voice murmurs from behind him. Cameron’s heart drops.

“Mum, I’m fine. I swear.” Cameron swallows the lump in his throat. Don’t turn around. Don’t turn around. “No- Mum, don’t call Wes. He doesn’t need to be involved in my- oh my God… I’m hanging up. I’ll call you tomorrow.” There’s plenty of noise around them in the cafe– people having conversations of their own, the sound of blenders and beeping ovens and more– but Greyson’s voice stands out amongst them all. Greyson’s voice echoes off the walls, bouncing around Cameron’s skull. “Love you. Bye.”

Cameron can feel the pressure of Greyson so close to his back. He’s directly behind him in line. He can practically feel Greyson’s breath passing down his spine. Cameron rocks on his heels, wondering if Greyson has noticed him yet, too.

He’s next up. He takes a small step forward.

“What can I get you?” the girl asks from the register, peering up from the register. “Cameron! Hey-”

Cameron hardly recognizes her. If it wasn’t for her vibrant teal hair, he would have no idea who she was. He forgets her name, but he remembers them being partnered up in his freshman year of college for a chemistry lab. She was a genius and carried them both through the project– he’s never been the best with chemistry. She was very sweet, but they’ve barely spoken since.

“Hi,” he says with a small blush rising in his cheeks. He feels Greyson’s attention on his back.

“How’ve you been?” she asks, shifting her stance slightly, smiling up at him. She’s very pretty. Her hair compliments her eyes, which are only bolded by her detailed eyeliner. Her ears are lined with piercings, and her nose is decorated too. “You look good.”

“You too,” he says, trying not to panic.

“What would you like?” she finally asks, blinking herself back into reality. “Usual? Raspberry Razzbull?”

“Please,” he nods. “That’s gonna be it.”

“Boring,” she scoffs. “Alright, cash or card?”

He pops out his card, and she pulls up the pay by card option for him.

“Go wait, I’ll bring it to you in a minute.”

Cameron murmurs a thank you and scurries away. He glances over his shoulder, making eye contact with Greyson completely by accident. Totally, entirely, not at all on purpose. He sinks down at a counter stool, training his eyes on his phone in an effort to distract himself and not think about Greyson, staring at him from the counter.

What's worse, if possible, is Greyson going in his direction to wait for his order, too. Greyson settles with his back resting against the counter, arms folded over his chest. Neither of them look at each other.

"She likes you," Greyson comments first.

"She's a cool person," Cameron mumbles under his breath.

"Like… *Likes you* likes you," Greyson says again. "Can't take her eyes off you."

"And?"

"God, you're impossible," Greyson huffs. Cameron rolls his eyes. "You're full of yourself."

"Am I required to be in love with anyone who shows any form of interest in me? Because if that's the case, I have a long list of professions to make," Cameron murmurs. They sit in silence for a long moment. Cameron wonders where the fuck his drink is.

He looks down at his fidgeting hands, an uncomfortable stir in his stomach craving a couple shots of vodka and a warm mouth. He almost misses that feeling of bliss just a few days prior. He almost misses Greyson's company. It's a disgusting feeling.

"So we agree?" Cameron finally asks under his breath. Greyson glances at him. "We don't talk about it?"

Greyson held his breath. The teal haired girl holds out Greyson's sandwich. He leans forward to take it before sitting back on his heels again. Greyson nods, just once.

"Good," Cameron nods back. "Perfect."

"Cameron?" the girl hums, holding out his drink. "Sorry for the wait– drink and receipt." Cameron spots the scribbling on the receipt. He chooses not to acknowledge it right away. He smiles at her.

“Thanks,” he says back, taking a sip of the sugary caffeine. “See you around.”

“See you. Call me.” she waves. “And sir, your drink-”

Fuck .

Cameron props the door open behind him, and Greyson follows him begrudgingly. They have the same walk home, with Providence Bagels being approximately three blocks from Cameron’s house, and five from the dorms. They stroll side by side, which is just as uncomfortable as it sounds. Cameron swigs his redbull drink, watching the ground as he walks.

“Ro’s mad at you, y’know,” Greyson murmurs, sipping his coffee. “The past few days, he just glares at his phone and cusses you out.”

“I know. He tracked me down to yell at me this morning.”

“Whatcha do?” Greyson looks up at him, curiosity glinting in those pretty Earthy eyes. Cameron keeps his mouth shut. “Pick a fight? Hit on someone he liked? Oh my god— Did you sleep with Luca?”

“No!” Cameron scowls, shooting Greyson a glare. “Will you shut the fuck up? For once?” Greyson smirks, waiting for Cameron’s answer. “If you must know, he’s pissed that I’m keeping my distance. He thinks I’m ghosting him. Because I’d rather him think I’m a bad person than… the truth.”

“Mhm,” Greyson rolls his eyes. “Sounds like some internalized shit to me.”

“What do you want, Greyson?” Cameron says, exasperated. “I don’t know how to talk to you.”

“I’m sorry I’m just that attractive,” Greyson shrugs. “I find joy in making you annoyed. Consider it retribution.”

“This is why I can’t be around you,” Cameron mutters. “You’re just… awful.”

“You’re no peach yourself,” Greyson scoffs. “Glad we’re on the same page here.”

“Same page. Same paragraph. Same word,” Cameron agrees. “We go separate ways and live happy lives without having to be in each

other's presence."

"Sounds like bliss," Greyson hums.

There's a sudden noise from across the street— honking horns and a drunken man slurring his swears and insults at passing cars. Cameron instantly stands straighter in an effort to appear larger, more capable. Greyson looks up at him, as if only now noticing Cameron's immense height for the first time. His eyes scale upwards, climbing him like a squirrel would a tree, lost in his hair, his eyes.

Cameron looks over, and Greyson instantly looks away.

They part ways at the fraternity block. Greyson continues forward to the dorms, and Cameron turns onto his street without so much as a farewell. He walks on, and into his house, without turning back. He can't afford to.

The house is loud when he comes home. He joins the couch of men arguing over a football game on the TV, drinking his drink and ignoring the world and all that he hates in it. He needs this cover. He needs this safety.

When Greyson gets home, it's to find Rowan and Luca in the dorm, Rowan's head in his hands, and Luca with a hand on his back.

"Everyone alright?" Greyson asks hesitantly. "No Santiago?"

"In class," Luca murmurs. "Ro got into a fight with Cameron this morning."

"Cameron? Starting fights? Who's surprised?" Greyson asks, unloading his stuff on his desk. "Buck up. You have a game tomorrow, and you need to get along if you want a shot at winning."

"I just don't get it," Rowan groans, picking his head up. "Because-Because he's a good guy. Genuinely, honestly, he is good . He's rough around the edges but he's not evil. He's not one of those guys. But it's like-like… overnight, a switch flipped in him. Something changed, and… I don't know what."

Greyson frowns. That pent up energy, the giddiness in his chest, the cockiness that rests on his shoulders, it all dissipates in the face of his best friend so lost, so hurt. He is consumed by guilt, knowing that in some convoluted way, he was the cause for this.

“Well…” Greyson sighs, sitting on his bed and scanning the pair of men on Rowan’s side of the room. “Maybe he’s just… having a hard time right now. He already had his Greek Life posse riding him. He’s probably scared shitless.”

“But why now?” Rowan groans. “I would understand if it was, like, immediately after the fight with Liam. I would get it if there was a spark to it. But there isn’t. This is entirely nonsensical and I don’t get it…”

“Maybe something happened that he’s not telling you?” Greyson proposes. Rowan froze. Slowly, his roommate looks up, narrowing his eyes.

“Do you know something?” Greyson’s stomach drops. He replaces the words in his mouth with the straw to his coffee, raising his eyebrows at Rowan. “You totally know something! What happened? How the fuck do you know something that I don’t? You guys are, like, mortal enemies.”

“We are,” Greyson confirms, nodding. “I don’t like him. But you do, so I-I’m just trying to… I don’t know. I’m trying to be an optimist for you.”

“Is it really optimism if we are hoping for something bad to happen to him?” Rowan groans. “I don’t know, Greyson. He usually tells me everything. Just a few weeks ago he was telling me about the girl he was hooking up with and would text me to tell me he needed to piss, and all of a sudden it’s like… radio silence. He’s my best friend. If something is happening, you’d think he’d at least reach out for some help.”

“Not everyone has that kind of common sense,” Greyson says.

He’s really toeing the line here, fearful of crossing a boundary he set by himself. He, himself, is not Cameron’s biggest fan. Sure, his mouth is like heroin and his touch is like silk and he makes Greyson feel completely and entirely euphoric, but the compliments end there. He is still a frat boy. He is still a footballer, and he still has friends whom Greyson despises. There is plenty of “irredeemable” about Cameron– he just so happens to be completely, entirely, gut wrenchingly mind blowing at making Greyson feel things he didn’t think he would ever feel. And hell– maybe that had to do with the vodka a little bit, too. He can’t give Cameron all the credit, right?

“He’s a stupid guy. He has the emotional intelligence of a brick and

the communications skills of a 13 year old boy. Expecting him to be outright with what he's feeling and what's going on in his life is a high bar. Maybe lower your standards a little."

"The fact that I'm getting advice from Greyson about Cameron is insane," Rowan scoffs. "But it's… it's good advice. I can't lie."

"Hell yeah it is," Greyson scoffs, taking another sip. "I'm a genius."

"You're an idiot with a big brain."

Game day.

Cameron is running on next to no sleep and several redbulls. He went for a run this morning around the neighborhood in an effort to wake himself up, followed by standing under a cold shower head. He was still dragging, though.

At the locker room, the chatter drifts around like a poisonous gas. Liam is making conversation about taking over today's game. Rowan is looking at Cameron every time Cameron so much as blinks. Aiden and Bryce are entertaining whatever bullshit Liam was saying. Cameron makes a mental note to himself to simply stay out of Liam's way today. He's not taking the fall for his stupidity this time. He's not getting into any fights for the sole reason of pride. If Liam feels so inclined to be the star of a terribly-rated show, so be it.

He pulls on his jersey over the padding, smoothing out the wrinkles and fluffing his hair. He digs through his back for a headband he sets aside for game days to get his hair out of his eyes. He passes it through and puffs out a breath.

"You good?" Rowan murmurs, so softly Cameron almost didn't notice him. Cameron glances over and nods. "You sure?"

"I'm great," Cameron insists, less than reassuring in his tone. Rowan nods slowly. "You?"

"Perfect."

The tension is still there, but they share a look, one that shows a sense of vulnerability that they otherwise can't reveal. Not here, at least. Cameron looks over his shoulder then back to his locker. The two of them return to silence, but with a mutual understanding of one another. At least, to the best of their ability.

When they run out onto the field, Cameron can already hear his blood pumping in his ears. His heart is hammering with the combination of anxiety, an overdose of caffeine, and his body working overtime to make up for his lack of sleep. He adjusts the helmet on his head, rolling his neck in slow circles to work out the kinks and knots from his awkward positioning last night.

He takes position and fixates his eyes forward. He makes direct eye contact with an opponent. He always finds that kind of stare awkward. He's uncomfortable having to perceive the other team as people like him. He's uncomfortable having to come to terms with the fact that his competitors are thinking the exact same thing he is.

Well, maybe not *exact* same thing.

He's fairly certain that the Yale Bulldogs linebacker isn't thinking about some attitude-dense prick from England who just so happened to also be the most mind blowing sex he's ever had. He's nearly positive that this stranger from New Haven isn't thinking about how he could possibly get into bed with Greyson again, and he probably isn't worrying about his own friends attacking him in the middle of the night for no reason other than the need to feel powerful. His life isn't threatened by the very team he feels at home with.

So, no. Maybe they don't have the same thoughts in their heads.

The game runs smoothly. Even with Liam's intervention, even with his need to feel special, they make it work. Cameron tries his best to adapt with Liam rather than against him– find a way to get him to the end zone instead of trying to get him to keep his nose out of everyone's business. He's being an enabler, and he feels gross for doing it, but he doesn't want to get punched in the jaw again, so he'll do what he must.

Greyson watches from the stands on the very edge of his seat– it's a little ridiculous looking, given he does not like football, nor does he like the players on the field. And yet, here he is, knees bouncing anxiously everytime Yale ends up with the ball, wincing when someone gets a particularly hard tackle, and clapping when they score. Luca and Santiago eye him with piqued interest.

"What's got you all invested? Placing bets?"

"Yep," Greyson says emotionlessly. Santiago furrows his eyebrows. "Looking to make a quick buck."

Looking for a quick fu-

“You don’t seem like the sports-betting type,” Luca says slowly.

“Shut up! Shut- look…”

They all turn and watch as the ball spirals in Rowan’s direction, landing in his arms. Their mutual friend hauls ass across the field, the Brown University attendee’s launching from their seats, wailing their excitement and hurling their cheers for Rowan to run. The three of them stand, clapping and hollering after him. They press into the barrier that protects them from toppling forward and dropping onto the field.

“Let's go Ro!” Greyson shouts over the sound of everyone’s screams.

“Go! Go! You’re almost there!” Luca pitches in. The three of them yell and rally after Rowan as he nears the end zone, shouting to veer left as someone darts in his direction. He, of course, doesn’t hear them.

He goes down, and he hits the ground *hard* .

They tumble for a few feet before they settle in the dirt. They both pop up almost instantly, but Greyson can see the ache in his friend, even with his face disguised by the helmet. Rowan tries to rotate his shoulders around, loosen up strained ligaments and tense muscles. He has a slight limp to his walk now, too. A couple of the guys job over to check on him, but he waves them all off.

He settles onto the bench, heaving his helmet off his head and spraying some water in his mouth from his water bottle. He’s pink in the face from exertion, and he keeps rolling his shoulder around. Greyson frowns, sitting forward against the fence.

“He’s fine,” Luca insists. “He’ll be good as new after he takes a breather.”

Greyson nods, swallowing his nerves and pushing away his fear. He is relieved at the sight of the jersey reading *Cunningham* walking up to Rowan. Cameron pats Rowan on the shoulder, crouching down closer to Rowan’s eye level. He has no idea what the two are saying, but Cameron is nodding and Rowan is gesturing to his shoulder and his leg, still a blazing red in his cheeks and sweat pouring profusely down his face.

“Is he not going back out?” Luca frowns.

“He went down hard…” Santiago reminds. “He might need a second to breathe.”

The game resumes. With a clap to his knee, Cameron leaves Rowan on the bench and stalks back toward the field. Greyson can’t help but study his figure as he strolls– long legs, thin torso, broad shoulders only wider thanks to the padding… Greyson’s gut does flips as he remembers standing beside Cameron just the other day on their walk home from the cafe. How much taller he was. How much broader. He’s beautiful, and Greyson can’t shake that idea. He’s stuck, just thinking about how good he is at everything he fucking does.

He tries to settle back in his seat again– without Rowan on the field, there is significantly less of a reason to excuse his excitement for the game. In his own personal opinion, he doesn’t have much of a reason regardless. He’s not dating Cameron. He’s not seeing him for much at all. Their interaction the other day was a one-time occurrence. Never again. Greyson, personally, finds Cameron entirely repulsive, and it takes quite a few drinks to find him appealing.

Aside from, of course, when he’s barreling down a field, people lunging at him left and right, and yet, doing a brilliant dance with death to avoid being tackled and taken down like Rowan was. Aside from when his veins are bulging with exertion, and his feet carry him faster than any man should be able to run. Aside from when he gets to the end zone, he ticks up the points by six, and halftime is called. Aside from when he strolls back to the bench, back to Rowan, pulling his helmet off his sweaty head and reveals the prettiest boy Greyson has ever seen in his life, hair damp with sweat, pulled back by the teeth of a headband.

Fuck, Greyson thinks he’s hot.

Dammit .

“I love half-time,” Luca says, smiling.

Greyson nods, but he can’t take his eyes off the bench. He would typically watch the colorguard in all their beauty– waving their flags through the air in a waltz with wind. He typically loves the flow and light reflection on metallic fabrics, or the way they manage to toss their flags so high in the air. Greyson couldn’t care less today. He was just hoping for a party tonight, and perhaps a few drinks.

Cameron’s back was enticing. The big, bold **26** that lines up with his spine. His last name is posted above it. Greyson would, under normal

circumstances, hurl his last name like a slur. Cunningham was reserved for anger, for distaste, for annoyance. But god, it looked good splayed across his shoulders.

Rowan looked over his shoulder and attempted a smile at his friends, giving a short wave. They wave back. Cameron follows his eyes, scanning the crowd behind them, only to land upon Greyson. He's stuck on Greyson. Greyson is stuck on him. Greyson takes a full breath, sitting forward and tracing his lower lip with the pad of his fingers.

Cameron looks back to the field, knees bouncing with the beats to the music.

Both Yale and Brown have a half-time performance. Greyson doesn't care, though. He's too busy looking at Cameron, watching his eyes shift around. He spends a while staring at the cheerleaders which sends an odd shiver down Greyson's spine, making him nauseous. Then he leans over to whisper to Rowan, and both of them smile. Cameron peaks over his shoulder again, scanning the crowd that turned out. Every time he looks, though, he always lands on Greyson again.

"You think they got over their arguments?" Santiago asks. "Because I might tear my hair out if I have to hear Rowan complain again."

"What hair? I thought you were bald," Greyson mumbles.

"Greyson gave Ro some pretty good advice. Maybe it stuck," Luca snickers.

"Greyson? Giving advice? Sounds like a disaster waiting to happen," Santiago scoffs. Greyson elbows him in the ribs. "Can you blame me? You can't pick out your shoes without asking me for help."

"Okay, but I'm a good friend," Greyson shrugs. "I can come up with some wisdom when he needs it."

"What do you get out of it?" Santiago nods at him. "What's your stake in this?"

"I don't have a stake . I just don't want my roommate to be a miserable bastard in our dorm every day. I prefer when he's Cameron's problem."

"Then that's your stake. Are you dumb?"

“Just an idiot,” Luca murmurs, smiling to himself. Greyson shot a glare at him.

“Mind your business.”

The crowd hollers and cheers with pure excitement as the dance line pulls off some fascinatingly beautiful motion that partners perfectly with the cheer team and the colorguard, all of whom are dancing with the music from the band. Greyson spares his stare toward the football team to the field, smiling at the sight of beautiful colors, pom-poms, and intricate motions that captivate his brain.

“Ro asked me to go to the party with him tonight,” Luca confesses. Greyson’s heart skips.

“Really now?” Greyson sits up straighter. “He didn’t invite me.”

“It’s one of those stupid limited ones,” Luca hums. “Alpha Delta Phi. I don’t know. They have a limited guest thing going on.”

“It’s a date,” Santiago leans over to say in Greyson’s ear, just loud enough for Luca to hear. Luca rolls his eyes.

“It’s not a date-”

“It’s a date,” Greyson deadpans. “It’s fine. Santiago and I will probably just go hang out in the honors lounge tonight anyways. We don’t need your stupid parties…”

“I’m… I’m actually busy tonight,” Santiago says with a gradually reddening face. Greyson frowns, narrowing his eyes at his best friend. “Y’know… I’m busy sometimes…”

“Did you seriously get invited too?!” Greyson gasps. Santiago says nothing. “Okay- y’know what– fine. Fine! I don’t… I don’t need you guys. I’ll have fun on my own. Fuck you.”

“Greyson-”

Greyson looks away from them, just in time to watch the flags soar into the sky in a beautiful twirl, only to be caught by their owner at the final beat of the music. Greyson’s heart hammers away in his sternum, and he’s nauseous, thinking about something that should be a non-issue. Of course he wasn’t invited– he’s not much of a party goer, and he’s almost always being targeted when he does go to parties. Hell– just this last one almost went south if it wasn’t for

Cameron. They didn't invite him because he wouldn't have fun. He wouldn't do well. He would be a miserable bastard who eventually gets knocked on his ass.

That doesn't mean he didn't want to be invited, though. Just once, he would like to be wanted.

The rest of the game goes fine. Great, even. Brown wins by a landslide, with Cameron getting another touchdown himself, and Rowan eventually joining the field again. He never went back to his full force, but he tried, and that's what counts.

The locker room is a loud celebration of claps on the back and laughter amongst naked men, all showering off their sweat and grime in order to present well for the party. It's a little more upscale– they need to wear something nicer, and while they'll all still end the night drunk and sleeping with strangers, they want to look like decent people at the beginning of the night.

Cameron washes his hair, standing with his face toward the shower head for a long few moments. He held his breath, welcoming the warmth in contrast to the brisk cold of October. He can hear Bryce, Aiden, and Liam all celebrating at the benches as they get dressed. Someone is hollering about something in regards to their next game– *do it all again!*

He rinses the conditioner out of his hair and turns off the showerhead. He rakes out as much of the water as possible and ruffles it with a towel.

"Two good runs," Liam says to Cameron as he joins them near the benches, looking for his clothes. Liam claps him on his wet shoulder, smirking up at him. "Amazing what happens when you stay out of the way. You can still get your spotlight, man…"

Cameron bites his tongue and just smiles back. Appease them, don't fight them. Rowan glances over and frowns.

Cameron pulls on something comfortable and warm– a collared shirt, then a sweater, and some dark jeans. He shrugs on his jacket, shuddering as the door to the locker room opens and closes with people flooding out.

"See you at Alpha," someone says, patting him on the arm. Cameron nods at them.

“Save me a drink,” Cameron calls back without making eye contact.

Then there were two.

“You played good,” Rowan comments, still wrapping up his knee with sports tape.

“Thanks,” Cameron huffs. “You feelin’ alright?”

“Probably just a strain…” Rowan shrugs. “My shoulder kills though.”

They return to silence. They both know that the conversation was all filler. It was all to make the room a little less quiet, a little less tense. There is a whole transaction they are missing, but neither want to start discussing.

“You going tonight?” Cameron asks softly. Rowan nods.

“You?”

Cameron bites his cheek. It’s easy to slide under the radar for events like this. No one will notice he didn’t go. Sure, he’s telling everyone he’s going. Sure, he’ll tell everyone in the morning that he was there. But that doesn’t mean he’s actually gonna go .

“Are we ever going to hang out again? Or is your whole… anti-Greyson thing now anti-me? Last I heard, I’m not on any shit-lists.”

“Ro…”

“Y’know what, maybe don’t answer that,” Rowan huffs, standing up and letting his pant leg fall again. “I’m gonna go. If you need to chat, though… call me. If you need to figure some shit out, just… reach out.” They make brief eye contact. Rowan raises an eyebrow, as if waiting for an affirmation. Cameron nods. “Cool.”

“Cool…”

Rowan walks out with a slight limp, and another gust of cold air blows through.

Cameron goes to the sink, ruffling his hair around in an effort to make the wet mess look somewhat less gross. He plays around with it for a few minutes, and checks his phone, and just overall… stalls. He doesn’t wanna go outside. It’s cold, and he’s not entirely sure about what he will do with the rest of his day. The library, maybe? Hang out at the empty house? Unless, God forbid, someone comes home early.

Everyone is going to be at the party, so he can't hang out with anyone. It's too early to go to a bar.

He grabs his duffel bag and shoulders it, sipping from his water bottle. He uses his shoulder to open the door to the outdoors, wincing at the wisping cold that stings his face. He breathes in the silence and welcomes the peace of loneliness.

That is, of course, until he walks out a few steps further and spots a figure sitting at the bottom of the bleachers, sitting on their phone, all alone. Cameron sighs, glancing around for Rowan, Luca, or Santiago. No one is near.

"What? Too stubborn for parties now?" Cameron asks, strolling up from the sidelines of the field. Greyson glances up from his phone and frowns.

"It's exclusive, didn't you hear?" Greyson rolls his eyes. "Greek Life has never been my cup of tea anyways."

Cameron scoffs.

"I get it. You think you're better than everyone else because you're not like those people. You want a medal?" Cameron asks, hands stuffed into his pockets. Greyson grits his teeth. "Why are you still here?"

"Why are you still here?" Greyson asks back. "Don't you have a party to be at? It's all about you and your sweaty jock friends, isn't it?"

"I asked you first." Cameron uncaps his water bottle and guzzles from it casually. He doesn't seem phased whatsoever. Greyson's scowl fades into something just… sadder, looking back down at his phone.

"It's nice to get some peace and quiet sometimes…" Greyson shrugs. "Not deal with the neighbors. Not deal with the pedestrians on the walk home. Not fight with the air-con. I can just… sit and catch my breath."

"Because you've had such an exerting morning," Cameron jokes. Greyson glares at him again.

"Alright, why are you here? Your turn," Greyson demands. Cameron rocks on his heels, looking around them to check and see if anyone was nearby. "You're lonely."

"I don't think it's lonely when you do it on purpose," Cameron shrugs.

“It’s nice to be alone sometimes.”

“Said like a true loner,” Greyson smirks. “I would know.”

“Did you just diss yourself?”

“Had to beat you to it.”

Cameron’s mouth twitches into an almost-smile. He adjusts how his bag sits on his shoulder, looking around again.

“Let me walk you home,” Cameron says with a small exhale. Greyson sits up slightly, furrowing his eyebrows. “People are weird in this part of the city.”

“Don’t think I can handle myself?”

“I know you can’t,” Cameron says back. “England has nothing on fuckin’ Miami in the summer.”

“Why would you go to Miami in the summer ?” Greyson asks, finally giving in and walking off the bleachers and joining Cameron on the sidelines. “Isn’t it supposed to be really hot?”

“Well,” Cameron huffs. “It’s either Miami in the summer at my Grandparent’s house where I got paid to be a dog-sitter, or stay in Kissimmee where I don’t have access to the beach and I have to do chores for free.”

“So… you’re spoiled?” Greyson assumes. Cameron shrugs. “Beach house? You’re such a prick.”

“Says the guy that moved across the world for some fancy college. You have no room to speak. What—Oxford not good enough for you?” Cameron asks.

“I’ll have you know Oxford is the most prestigious school in the world, and that I-“

“Yawn. Congrats, you’re smart. I don’t need a lesson on the UK’s 1%.”

“You literally asked!”

“And I didn’t intend for you to answer.”

Greyson folds his arms over his chest and walks alongside him with a returned scowl. They walk in silence for a few moments— their feet

crunch on dry leaves and Cameron manages to kick along a rock for a few blocks, too. Greyson is unsure where they're going— Cameron said he was "walking Greyson home", but… then what? Cameron turns around and goes to the party? Goes home himself? This is weird.

Right?

He got himself into this mess. He was the one who did this. He went to that dumb party in Cameron's house. He picks all the fights. He drank. And he kissed Cameron. He kissed Cameron so hard, so much, until it didn't really feel like kissing anymore. Until it felt like they were one in the same. He made his mess. Now he has to clean himself up.

"We should probably talk about it," Greyson murmurs.

"About what?"

This is like the coffee shop yesterday. Nauseating, stressful, and painfully awkward.

Greyson takes a slow breath in and nods. He stuffs his hands into his pockets, scanning the trees that are gradually changing colors. He needs to look anywhere but Cameron; anywhere other than his shoulders, which somehow look broader without the padding. Maybe that's because Greyson knows exactly what they look like under that jacket. He can't look at Cameron's sweater-covered hands, which he blows hot air into every few minutes before tucking them away in pockets again. He especially shouldn't look at his stupidly handsome face that Greyson wants to stare at all day.

"About…" Greyson swallows. He feels like the sound echoing between them. "This is weird."

"Mhm."

"Why aren't you going to the party?" Greyson asks instead in an effort to change the subject. Cameron frowns. They are rounding the corner to the street with Greyson's dorm buildings on it, and rounding their conversation off in a full circle. The building slowly comes into view. Greyson is unsure what happens beyond the gates. Beyond the front door.

Behind closed doors.

“I just… didn’t want to,” Cameron sighs. “I’m… I’m trying to be on my best behavior, and that entails… flying under the radar for as much as possible, and avoiding any event where I can have a target on my back. If it’s a busy enough party, I’ll say I went, ask someone to be an alibi, and then… I dunno. Drink alone in my room? Do some homework?”

“You live a tragic life…” Greyson says. “You can have fun without getting drunk.” Cameron tsks. “Does alcoholism run in your family?”

“Does the inability to keep your thoughts to yourself run in yours?” Cameron rolls his eyes. “No. Stop psycho-analyzing my family. I’m fine.”

“I’m not psycho analyzing. You just bring up your family a lot, but don’t seem to talk that much, and dependence on alcohol is genetic-“

Greyson scans them into the building, and Cameron follows him. *Lonely* . Greyson’s heart flutters. He should find a way to cut this exchange short sooner rather than later. But Cameron follows him up the stairs, and he seems so comfortable in the warm heat of the dorms in comparison to the brisk Rhode Island autumns.

Greyson lets them into his bedroom. It’s silent. Rowan is at the party. Most of the neighbors are too, apparently, given by the silence surrounding them. Cameron paces into the room, arms folded over his chest as he glances around.

“Shoes off. You know the rule,” Greyson declares. “Sit and don’t touch anything.”

“That’s… contradictory,” Cameron hums, letting his shoes sit at the entrance of the room. “How do I both sit and not touch anything ? Just… make a chair out of air? Hover?”

“Watch it. I could just tell you to get out,” Greyson huffs, sliding his jacket off and hanging it in his wardrobe. “For someone trying to fly under the radar, you really chose to spend your afternoon with me.”

“Yeah. Not my first choice,” Cameron says, deciding to sit at Greyson’s desk. “I was planning on going home and getting a drink, but then you accused me of being an alcoholic. And I thought about going to the library, but I don’t wanna get called out for not being at the frats this afternoon. And I would have really liked it if me and my own best friend could hang out without worrying that someone is out to get us, but he is going to the party, and I am… here.”

“Here,” Greyson copies.

“With the one guy no one will bother to ask about the party. It’s perfect.”

“So you’re using me,” Greyson decides. Cameron groans.

“You are so dramatic for no reason,” Cameron states, glancing at Greyson’s desk. His eyes fall upon a photo that makes him smile. Greyson follows his gaze and wants to throw up. “Is that you?”

“Yeah…” Greyson shifts uncomfortably.

“You look like a cheese ball,” Cameron declares. “You seemed like a sweet kid. What happened?”

“People like you happened.”

“People like me,” Cameron mocks. “Do you want me to stay or go? Because you are… really confusing, and I’ll do whatever you say.” Greyson frowns.

“Okay. Then go. I don’t… I don’t need you making fun of me and making my room all gross with your… your jock-germs.”

“Fine. I’ll go. Sit alone in your room. It builds character,” Cameron says, pushing to stand upright again. His eyes fall upon a black jacket on Greyson’s bedpost. “Is that mine?”

Greyson’s face flares red. He could throw up. He could choke on his words and die. He bites his cheek as hard as he possibly could, his face flushing a bright red.

“It-it wasn’t intentional-“ Greyson says slowly. “I think it was when-when we were just—“

“I get it. You like my clothes. No stress,” Cameron shrugs.

“What? No. No-“ Greyson shifts to his other foot. “I-I do not. No. You’re gross and I need to take a bleach bath after sitting near you-“

“Mhm,” Cameron glances at the tag to double check it was his. It definitely was— his initials are scribbled into the tag with a marker. Greyson folds his arms over his chest, and Cameron glances at him. “You want me to go?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Then… step away from the door.”

“What?”

“The door,” Cameron says, nodding to the door behind Greyson. “Let me leave. And I’ll get out of your hair. We’ll never cross paths again.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

Greyson still doesn’t move. Cameron finds it laughable. He folds the jacket over his arm, walking toward the door, toward Greyson. Greyson holds his breath as Cameron brushes past him. Their arms bump against each other. He’s reaching for the door knob. Greyson’s heart is magnetically being pulled through his back and in Cameron’s direction.

The doorknob clicks with it propping open.

“Wait, Cameron-“ Greyson whirls around, grabbing Cameron’s sleeve. Just as quickly, Cameron turned back around, kicking the door shut behind him, and they crash together in a head on collision. A fiery accident with casualties galore— they wrap around one another like two trucks going 120 miles per hour, pummeling together.

Greyson’s hand balls up around Cameron’s stupid sweater, and they stumble backwards. Greyson doesn’t know how to excuse this behavior. He doesn’t know how to say this is stupid, that they should quit while they’re ahead. Mostly because he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to quit, now or ever. He wants to keep going. He wants to spend the rest of his life having someone touch him as purposefully as Cameron does, kiss him as smoothly as Cameron does, satisfy him like Cameron does.

“I could use a drink right now,” Greyson confesses against Cameron’s mouth.

“Now who’s the alcoholic?” Cameron murmurs back, hiking Greyson’s legs up long enough to get him to sit on his bed. Greyson gasps as Cameron’s cold hand laces through his hair. “Tell me to stop.”

“Don’t.”

“If I need to-“

“I will give you a black eye if you fucking blue-balls me. Don’t,” Greyson threatens, yanking on his collar and kissing him again. Cameron’s tongue slips against his easily. If anything, kissing him got better with them being sober. If anything, kissing him was easier when he’s sober.

He just needs the mental idea out of his head, which he can’t really do without a couple beers in his system. He needs to not think about the fact that he was kissing Cameron — just do it.

Cameron smiles as Greyson’s hand loosens on his collar. His fingertips graze his neck and jawline, and he relaxes steadily. Cameron’s body slots perfectly between Greyson’s knees. Cameron’s hand is skimming up Greyson’s waist, over the waistband of his jeans, peeking under Greyson’s shirt in search of soft skin and shudders. He finds both, his cold hands making a shiver pass through Greyson like a rolling wave.

“You okay?” Cameron exhales as he presses up the long sleeve shirt, over his ribs, over his chest. Greyson ducks out of the kiss to aid in pulling the top off, balling it up and tossing it in whatever direction.

“Stop asking,” Greyson mumbles. Cameron nods, smiling as Greyson pulls on him again, trying to get him into bed. He lets Greyson peel his sweater off, laughing at the groan of frustration when he’s faced with the second shirt beneath it. “You bastard.”

“I was cold.”

“Fuck off.”

Cameron, in an effort to make Greyson happy, pulls on the collar of his shirt and slides it off his head. Greyson’s breath caught in his throat, watching his muscles tense, seeing his abdomen in full sunlight, his ribs, his shoulders… Greyson reaches out to touch without thinking.

Cameron’s hands are cold on Greyson’s pelvis, thumbing at the button to Greyson’s jeans. His hips instinctively lift toward Cameron’s hands. The button pops, and Greyson shuffles out of his clothes whilst Cameron tries to get them off, too. An arm hooks around Cameron’s neck as he dips his mouth into Greyson’s jaw, and below his ear. Greyson pulls him closer, if possible, pressing on Cameron’s waistband too.

Greyson’s chest heaves with the passing kisses. His throat is littered with Cameron’s mouth, with saliva, and closer to his collarbone, his

chest, decorated in hickeys. Greyson's fingers lace through Cameron's hair and tug, pressing into any touch, any graze, from Cameron. His hands, his mouth, his anything.

When Cameron gets low enough, Greyson's hand is stuck in his hair, the other one tucked behind his head. He screws his eyes shut and lifts his hips toward Cameron's mouth. Whatever he wants. Wherever he wants. Cameron can have it all if it means Greyson gets to feel like this.

Every noise is amplified in bliss. One might think it should be the other way– the world goes quiet as you focus on what makes you happy. No– God no. Greyson can't help but hear every creak in his bed frame under their bodies, every ruffle of the sheets, every breath from Cameron and the way it brushes against his skin. The wind whipping against the windows, and the neighbors walking into their dorms, and the girl one floor above them apparently also going to town with a partner of her own. Greyson can't help but laugh when he hears her feminine, yet proud moans, rattling his ceiling tiles. Cameron laughs too, into Greyson's skin to muffle himself. Neither can contain their childish, stupid joy.

Not a drop of liquor on his tongue, and yet, it only got better.

Cameron finds comfort in burying his face where it can't be seen. Perhaps, if he spares himself the intimacy of eye contact, of studying the beauty of the boy in bed with him, he won't have to face it. He won't have to handle the consequences of his actions should he not be attached to it. He nips and bites at Greyson's skin, and he sucks his watercolor bruises, and he disguises his noises as breaths against whatever fabric or skin he could hide behind. He soaks in the feeling of Greyson's nails raking up his spine, and running through his hair, and the warmth of another body. It's better when he's sober. He hates to say it, but it's true.

They are restlessly enchanted with one another. When Cameron has given Greyson the best blowjob of his life, Greyson can't help but want more. Cameron could manipulate his body in whatever way he pleased. Greyson wanted to be his to mold. They share open mouthed kisses as Greyson tugged him up for affection. Greyson threw one leg over Cameron's hips, and in a needy pant for affection, the two's hips pressed into one another, working Greyson back up for more. More, and more, and more.

And when they settle– when they need to catch their breath before

another round, when their chests heave and they can't fathom moving for the next twenty four hours, Cameron lays at Greyson's side, an arm drawn across his waist and tracing patterns on his ribs. Greyson lazily plays with Cameron's hair, his free hand tracing his mouth.

"What the fuck is wrong with us?" Greyson exhales. Cameron swallows, his body tensing. Greyson's fingers knead into his skull again, though, and all feels right with the world again.

"I don't know…" Cameron murmurs back, tucking his face into Greyson's torso. "We… we should figure it out, though."

"Yeah."

Cameron's eyes skim up his body, bare, silky and shimmering with sweat, and his every feature sharp. His ribs, his shoulders, his jaw, his nose. Cameron has always looked at Greyson like something that was soft, something simple. Christ, he is the sharpest, most complex person Cameron has ever met.

"Later," Cameron determines, pressing up on his knee. Greyson scoffs out a laugh as Cameron tackles him into another open-mouthed kiss.

"Later," Greyson agrees between breaths, skimming his hand back down Cameron's torso, sharp as a knife, cold as ice, and as wanted as love.

They carry the routine for nearly two hours before Cameron makes the ultimate decision that they are cutting it too close. If Cameron thinks sleeping with Greyson is bad, he can only imagine how horribly it would go over with Rowan. Greyson pulls on a pair of flannel trousers, which makes Cameron miserable , and Cameron puts his outfit back on, combing his hair back. He adjusts his collar on his neck in the mirror.

"See? Mirrors. They do wonders," Greyson says with a yawn. "You should think about getting one for your room."

"Is this some kind of kink for you?" Cameron asks back, flattening his sweater. "Ew. Why do I smell like you?"

"I wonder why," Greyson rolls his eyes. "Maybe because-"

The lock to the door buzzes with the key card being used. Cameron's heart drops to his stomach, and Greyson shot upright. Both are flooded with a guttural panic. Cameron looks between the window

and under Greyson's bed, wondering which will be the easier way out of this. They might be three stories up, but Cameron is willing to make the jump. Hell– he's already hiding in a closet, how bad can it be to be under Greyson's bed?

Greyson swung a textbook in his lap to look busy, popping the cap off a highlighter. He settles into the position so easily, Cameron wonders how many times he's done it.

The door opens, and there's a sharp breath.

"Cameron?"

"Hey," Cameron glances over his shoulder, smiling. "What's up?"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"What are you doing here?" Rowan says slowly. Greyson peeks up from his book, hiding his fear incredibly well.

"You're back early," Greyson comments.

"My-My shoulder was killing me… Why are you here?" Rowan asks again. Dammit. Cameron looks around again.

"I think I left a jacket here a while back. Just… wanted to grab it. It's getting cold."

"…Okay," Rowan frowns, looking at the jacket Cameron left at the beginning of the semester, still sitting on the desk chair. But, rather than going for that one, Cameron approaches the denim one that hung at the end of Greyson's bed. He plucks it up and shrugs it on overtop of the coat he was already wearing. Rowan's heart hammers, looking between his two closest friends. He can't say a damn word. "Glad you found it. It's… It's cold out there. Want a ride home?"

"Nah," Cameron waves him off. "Do me a favor though– if anyone asks, I was with you at the party today. I don't wanna deal with Bryce and Aiden riding my ass." Rowan nods, stammering for words, trying to appear casual. He can't, though. There's nothing to say.

"Sure."

"Thanks," Cameron beams, clapping him on the un-injured shoulder. "Feel better man. Let me know if you need something."

"Will do…"

Rowan watches him leave, listening to the door shut behind him. He glances at Greyson again, sitting in silence with the book open in his lap, and drowning in one of his sweatshirts, as if he was purposefully drowning himself in the biggest possible clothes. Finally, he looks at the jacket from August, still sat on his desk, abandoned in time.

What the fuck?

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUNNNNNNN

So.

Thoughts?

Smile.

I feel mischevious. This was fun. Sorry for any delays in writing (and shitty grammar or spelling-- having a baby in the house means I'm easily distracted!!!) But I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and many more to come. life is good. follow me on twitter @ hayloftown for any updates on when chapters are coming or my commentary on daily life.

until next time....
hayl

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Throw caution to the wind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson's favorite time of day is the downtime between his 11AM and his 3PM class. Not only is it the perfect opportunity to get himself lunch and a coffee, and a good chance to wander the city he's been living in for the past few years, but also because when he walks into his empty dorm building at approximately 1PM, Cameron is waiting for him in the stairwell of the third floor.

With soft giggles and mischievous smiles, Greyson drags Cameron by the wrist into the dorm. Rowan is in his 1:00 PM engineering class, meaning the room is empty for approximately 2 hours, which is coincidentally the time they both need to leave for their next class.

Greyson's arm hooks around his neck so easily. He laughs when Cameron hoists him off his feet now. He doesn't stress about needing a drink, or get in his own head about germs. Greyson doesn't give a damn about anything other than their few hours of fun. Cameron's hands, and their mouths, and scattered hickeys, and muffled moans. It's all addictive. It's all perfect.

"This means nothing," Greyson murmurs afterwards, nestled into Cameron's shoulder, catching his breath. As always. Nothing. It means nothing.

"Nothing," Cameron exhales, dragging his fingers down Greyson's spine. "Barely even friends with benefits."

"Can't be friends with benefits if we're not even friends," Greyson agrees. "Just…" He picks his head up to make eye contact, propping his chin on Cameron's mass of a shoulder muscle. Both boys blush and smile. "Fuck buddies."

"That's so cheesy," Cameron scoffs, tousling Greyson's hair. "No."

"Sex sidekicks?"

“Oh my God-”

“Cock companions.”

“Stop, doofus,” Cameron groans, pushing Greyson back down into the mattress and crashing their mouths together. “We still have a few minutes.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you to finish quick,” Greyson says back, lacing his fingers through Cameron’s hair and arching his hips upwards. Cameron takes hold of Greyson’s jaw roughly, raising his eyebrows. Greyson’s lips pucker slightly from the pressure on his cheeks. Greyson finds it incredibly hilarious, and a little sexy.

“Say it again,” Cameron threatens. “I dare you. See what happens.”

Greyson only swoons.

In contrast, Greyson’s least favorite time of day is the ten minute rush prior to the start of his 3:00PM class, with him and Cameron begrudgingly dressing themselves and sneaking out of the dorms separately to ensure they aren’t seen together. Despite headed to the same lecture hall, they take completely different routes, which typically ends in Greyson arriving a few minutes early and out of breath, and Cameron walking in a few minutes late and leisurely strolling in. Greyson is typically found in the front row of the auditorium, and Cameron in the very back, sat on the floor, because there’s no seats left open.

It’s always a painful class— mostly because Greyson is somewhere between in his head and in Cameron’s pants— and because it seemingly drags on forever. Greyson takes his notes, and he listens to the lecture, and he doodles in his notebook, but he can’t focus for the life of him— how could he? With everything going on…

Cameron spends the class watching the back of Greyson’s head, wondering how the hell he moves on so easily. Cameron wonders how it’s so simple for him to strut into class like he owns the fucking place, sit so casually like it was any other day, and study like he was any other student. The only reason to believe Greyson wasn’t completely unphased, entirely unimpressed, was the jostle to his knee, bouncing as he worked.

Cameron never gets anything done in this class. How could he, when Greyson is right there?

And after class– God it's miserable. It's absolutely, completely horrific, standing up and flooding out of the auditorium, hoping to catch a glance at one another, only to realize that they are both just out of reach, always looking the wrong direction, always a few too many feet away. Like a barrier separating them from their private and public lives. Because Cameron cannot be seen at Greyson's side, otherwise he will become a quick victim of his friends, and Greyson shouldn't be seen at all.

Cameron spends most of his free, unaccompanied time in the music hall in an effort to drain his thoughts into the piano keys, writing more music and finding more songs to fit his mind. The unfortunate truth is: Mozart did not write of this. Chopin did not have a secret gay lover of whom he was the enemy of to keep hidden from his dearest loved ones. No— the ones with secret affairs and lucrative sex lives are primarily modern artists who wouldn't go near a classical instrument.

Thus, he is left to write his own.

Greyson spends as much of his available time as possible in the gym.

It's not that he was all that fit. He's never been much of a strength-training type, and he's far from a gym rat, but he finds some peace in the echo of the racquetball courts as he serves and dribbles a volleyball off the walls. He beats the sense out of his volleyball, scuffing the pristine white walls and letting sweat drip down his spine as he works out his aggression, his anger, his exhaustion. He's tired of this fight— of having to walk a wire in an effort of not getting his ass kicked. He has never felt closer to tipping over the edge, and yet, he loves the fucking thrill. Is that so bad?

Greyson plays more volleyball, more racquetball and tennis and runs more miles on the treadmill than he ever has before. He tries to get the last of his energy out in the gym so he doesn't punch some frat dude in the throat, or worse, try to jump Cameron's bones again.

There is a certain harmony between chaos and creation. There is a rhythm to the thump of one's heart. There is an violence to the aggression against an instrument. That's what causes calluses; a hardening to soft tissue under the intense pressure of all else.

Cameron leans into the keys as he presses them. He places his entire heart and all of his soul into discovering the impossible— answers to an unasked question. Greyson's palms are raw and red from his

aggression, and the racquetball team waiting for the court are grumbling outside the door. The music is blasting too loud in his ears to hear much else other than the aggressive drums and the hammering of his heart. Quicker, and quicker, and louder, and louder, until sweat is dripping from their brows and smearing their cheeks, and the world is an echo of their music.

The peace is disrupted by an interruption of their focus.

“What’s wrong?”

The door slams closed heavier than necessary from the gravity of the hinges. Luca winces at the clatter he accidentally caused and catches the volleyball that Greyson lost control of. Greyson huffs, hands on his waist and stretching out his back, walking toward the wall. Luca tucks the ball under his arm and watches with a careful eye.

“Are they hurting you?”

Rowan is stood at the base of the stage. Cameron’s hands collide with a sharp, off-tune clang . He shakes off his hands and cringes. He swipes his sweaty brow with his wrist and sniffles. He wants to run off. He wants to hide under the bench. He wants to stay silent and not say a damn word.

“I’m fine.”

Luca doesn’t seem convinced. He settles against the wall, tossing the ball only a few inches before catching it again. Greyson turns, half hoping Luca left with nothing more than the reassurance, half knowing that Luca doesn’t take no for an answer.

“And yet, I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re hiding in the music hall like it’s fucking dialysis and you’re in liver failure,” Rowan huffs. “What’s wrong? Did you get socked again?”

“No,” Cameron huffs. “Just… got a lot in my head. Busy brain. A lot going on.”

“You are so fucking dramatic, dude…”

“Lay off,” Greyson groans. “I’m stressed. I’m tired. Midterms have been shit. People suck. The holidays are coming up-“ Greyson takes his ball back and returns to dribbling it against the wall. Luca stays back, out of the way. The walls and floors echo with every impact. Greyson mindlessly slams his volleyball down again. It bounces off the floor, the wall, then back to him. “I’m fine-“

“Is this about your dad?”

“There’s nothing going on with my father,” Cameron swallows the lump in his throat, tickling the keys again. He tries to relax his shoulders.

“You said you haven’t been speaking.”

“That’s because he thinks I should be doing better than I am, and I don’t have the heart to tell him that I don’t get any better,” Cameron sighs. “I can’t disappoint him. I am… I am his only son. I am his only hope for some good ol’ masculinity and success. I already disappointed him by not enlisting the moment I turned 18. God forbid he places any trust in my sisters…”

“Have you called them?”

“The girls?” Cameron raises an eyebrow. “Why would I? Complain about the fact that I’m Dad’s favorite? Rub it in their face that I got everything handed to me, and I’m an ungrateful prick about it? I’m sure that’ll go over well…” Cameron rolls his eyes. “It’s… it’s fine.”

“You love your sister.”

“Of course I do,” Greyson sighs. “Just- y’know. Shit’s hard. She doesn’t… she has no clue what life was like for us. And maybe that’s a good thing. But walking into that house is like a time capsule. Talking to my family is like talking to a therapist. I don’t care for either…”

Greyson sighs. Luca frowns. “I appreciate your concern, but really, I’ll be okay. Give me a little time to… to destress, and… I dunno. We’ll go get dinner tonight.”

“Can’t.”

Greyson furrows his eyebrow. He lets the ball fall and whirls around to face Luca. Luca never turns him down on plans. Especially these days.

“Why?”

“I’m… I’m seeing a movie with Ro tonight?” Luca grimaces. Greyson’s eyes practically bulge out of their sockets. “And I don’t want you to freak out, because you’ll freak me out, and I just wanna go see the movie and maybe have dinner or something with our friend-“

“Who you have a massive crush on like you’re a high school girl hiding behind her locker,” Greyson scoffs. “You’re going on a date with my roommate.”

“It’s not a date.”

“It’s a date,” Greyson declares. “If Santiago heard this- oh my God. Our roommates are hooking up. I-I can’t believe the day has come…”

“Do *not* tell Santiago. He will rip me a new one,” Luca groans. “He only just started being okay with Ro and Cameron. I don’t need him worrying like my mother, or worse: like yours.”

“Shut up,” Greyson rolls his eyes. “Fine. I’ll keep my mouth shut, so long as you stop bothering me about this.”

“Swear it,” Luca insists. Greyson frowns.

“I swear.”

Greyson doesnt want that trouble. He’s not trying to get in the middle of a feud between Santiago and Luca, or worse: Santiago and Rowan , his two best friends whom Greyson cannot live without.

He should really hang out with Santiago soon.

“We’re talking about you-”

“Well, if you’re going on a date , I wanna know,” Cameron says in an effort to escape his mortifying thoughts, to avoid Rowan digging anymore.

“It’s not a date. Shut up. It’s me hanging out with a new friend. Something you should be doing if you weren’t too much of a whimp to stand up to your own roommates,” Rowan snaps.

And they have completed the circle . Back to him. He’s been served a fastball, and Cameron is not good at tennis. He’s even worse at dodgeball.

“Are you okay?” Rowan asks again.

Cameron swallows the lump in his throat. He’s unsure on what he can even say in this moment. He can’t tell Rowan about Greyson. God no. That’s a death wish waiting to happen. And he can’t tell him about home. And he, in complete honesty, doesn’t really know how he feels in spite of everything else. He’s a whirlwind of thoughts, none of them clear enough to decipher.

“Just… stressed. You know how it is,” Cameron murmurs. “Social stuff. Home stuff. Family stuff. I just… I’m exhausted. I just… like the quiet of this place. It lets me think without having to worry, y’know?”

Rowan nods slowly. He wanted to ask. He wanted to pry. Rowan and Cameron haven’t said much to each other in a while now, and he just keeps thinking about that stupid jacket– both the one Cameron took the other day, and the one still sat on his desk. He feels like he deserves to know what’s going on, but he’s honestly not sure he’s ready to understand. Rowan enjoys the peace of his obliviousness.

“I know,” Rowan nods slowly. “Are we ever gonna talk about it, though?”

“What part?” Cameron murmurs, hitting the keys again and looking away.

“Any of it?” Rowan bites his cheek. He scans Cameron’s tense shoulders, his tight jaw. Cameron hesitates, letting the music notes answer for him. It is a song of uncertainty. Rowan sighs. “Okay. Well… I love you. If you need to talk… I’m here to listen.”

“I know,” Cameron says without looking up. “Have fun on your date.”

“Have fun with your music.”

Rowan leaves less than satisfied, and Cameron plays on, more stressed than ever.

When Greyson returns to the dorm that evening, it's to an empty room. Rowan is still on his date with Luca. He drops his gym bag mindlessly and flops down face first onto his bed. He should probably shower, or do laundry, or work on cleaning the room, but in all honesty, Greyson is physically exhausted . Mentally, too.

Luca's words keep running in his head. Inquiring about his sister. Asking about his Dad .

Greyson wasn't all that old when his father died. He was 15. Wesley was 19. Phoebe was 2.

He was still in secondary school. He was going to college in the fall. He was excited to travel, to see the world, to explore outside his comfort zone and experience a life other than the walls of his home and the safety of his mother.

Dad was sick for a long time. They knew they would lose him eventually. They knew the fight would be a loss in the end, no matter how valiantly he slayed each growing dragon-like lesion, no matter how many experimental treatments, like chemotherapy, bone marrow transplants, and other clinical trials that obliterated his immune system. Multiple Sclerosis was no easy feat, but it isn't supposed to be fatal.

But a mild case of the flu becomes pneumonia, which becomes life on a ventilator, which becomes inability to breathe independently, and Dad had it strictly in his record: he did not want to live a life in comatose. He did not want to live a life on a vent. He did not want to live a life in hospice until old age takes him. That is his own personal hell.

Dad was a grumpy old man. MS does that. It attacks the brain, Mum told them when they were kids. The most healthy patients are likely to develop severe mental health issues, whether they be depression, anger issues, anxiety, and more. Dad had it all– the poor guy couldn't catch a break on symptoms– but he didn't show it. He was a grumpy old man, a stickler for rules, and he was kinda a drill sergeant at times, but Greyson likes to remember his happier days. Before his balance went, and he would chase the boys around the backyard. Before he went into the wheelchair, and they would duel with his canes. Before he went into hospice, and they would take rides in his

wheelchair in his lap down the hill and all struggle to get him back up again.

Greyson recalls his father's death, scrubbing his hands raw in the bathroom of the hospital, the mask slipping down his nose and him sniffling from a mixture of tears and his runny nose.

The flu. Something every kid gets at some point.

Greyson finally gets up to shower.

He feels like he's fifteen again. His skin goes red and raw from his incessant grit, trying to get the foreign touch and disease off of him. Just this morning, he and Cameron shared his bed. He needs to wash the sheets clean of their bodies. He needs to wash his hair clean of Cameron's fingers.

The water is steaming hot. It burns his skin, and he wonders how red he will be when he steps out.

Why is he so fucking stupid?

He should call his Mum. He should call Phoebe. Hell– maybe he should even reach out to Wes. Usually, whenever Greyson misses Dad, they all miss him, too. The one thing they can all agree upon is their grief. Because even in his worst moments, Dad was a good Dad .

When Greyson comes out of the shower and gets dressed again, he opens his phone to see a text notification at the top. Not from his mother, or brother, but from Cameron.

***Cameron** : did u hear Luca and Rowan went on a date?*

Greyson held his breath, shuffling back to his room. He glances up at Rowan's empty bed, at the black jacket sat on Rowan's desk, and frowns. He looks back down and tries to figure out what to say back. Everything he says to Cameron feels like he's throwing caution to the wind.

***Greyson** : Luca said it wasn't a date*

He sets his phone down and steadily pulls the sheets off his bed and off his pillows, tossing them into a hamper. He redresses the mattress in a fresh cover and mattress pad, glancing at his phone when it buzzes with a response.

***Cameron** : its not a date, just like you and i don't hang out.*

Greyson's breath hitches. He turns his phone off and sets it aside.

Cameron sits in his room, touseling his hair anxiously, awaiting a reply. From Greyson, from Rowan, from his sister. He doesn't care who. He just wants one of them to pay attention to him. He wants one of them to look his way. Greyson went silent after his last text. Rowan hasn't responded to his *how's the date?* text. All that's left is Calyx.

Twenty minutes ago, he sent her:

***Cameron:** miss u*

Cameron's family dynamic was always an odd one.

He can say easily his parents love all their children. Mom loves all four of them equally. Dad loves all four of them, just… less equally.

Cameron didn't move away to prove himself better, but instead, to escape the impossible pressure to be perfect. He didn't want to be the star. He didn't want everyone to look at him the moment he came home, asking him a million questions about school, and sports, and his friends. He was treated like a celebrity in his own home. And when he turned 18, when he didn't follow in Dad's footsteps and become a military legacy, Dad was… heartbroken. Cameron moved to Rhode Island, the most unassuming state possible, and he lays low in an average football team in an average football position and he plays the part to be a regular dude. He thinks the only thing still "special" about him is his commitment to an Ivy League education, but fancy tutors can get you there easily .

But he can't lie. He misses his sisters. He misses the normalcy with them. Because while his parents, his grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, they all worshiped the ground he walked on, his sisters always managed to humble him. His older sister Clarke was always over his shoulder in school, roughing up his hair and teasing him in front of his friends. Callan was his first little sibling, only two years younger, and she was the annoying little sister who all his friends had crushes on, and when Cameron came home from school every day and sat on the floor in front of the couch, you could count on Callan to be right behind him, braiding pieces of hair into knots.

And Calyx. Little Callie. She's not all that much younger than them, but the baby of the family. Easily overlooked, but easily Cameron's favorite. He would move heaven and hell for her. She was the classic

little sister, who wanted to make art projects and bracelets and hang out with her older brother no matter how much it annoyed him. She's quiet, but kind, and sweet, and she doesn't get nearly enough credit for being the best Cunningham kid there is.

His phone buzzes, and he hopes to see a response from Callie. He clicks the notification before he can read it.

***Greyson** : wanna come over?*

Good enough.

Chapter End Notes

Friends are SUSPICIOUS. they are just watching this shit unfold before their eyes not knowing what they are even seeing and i love it. also, this chapter was SUPER experimental with the perspective play. what are our thoughts? was it too confusing?

next chapter halloween chapter?? mayhaps !!

happy october folks, and happy monday. I am sick today, which is the only reason this chapter is in existence, and also likely the reason for any spelling or other stupid errors. so forgive me. i am unwell.
until next time :)
hayl

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Trick or Treat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Halloween was always a big thing when Cameron was a kid.

He loved to celebrate. It felt like his one and only chance to be himself, rather than the costume he wore for everyone else. Sure, he was still hiding under a Scream mask, or in some kind of lame buzz lightyear costume, but he felt like he could have fun and not be judged for it.

Tomorrow is Halloween, and for once, Cameron is dreading it.

It falls on a Wednesday this year, which is arguably one of the worst days for it to be on. None of his classes are canceled, and there is a massive party at Delta Phi for the holiday. Costumes required. It was an open door party, too. The whole school could turn up. They bought enough liquor to make themselves into a bar, and they went to town on decorations to make it that much cooler .

Cameron lies in Greyson's bed, their sweat-shined bodies sticking to each other, and Greyson's hands mindlessly running through Cameron's hair. This was the safest place to be. This was his favorite place to be.

"You going tomorrow?" Cameron asks in a mumble, tracing Greyson's hip. The man hesitates. Cameron picks his head up slightly, looking him over. Greyson avoids eye contact. "Grey…"

He props himself up on his elbow and Greyson's hands fall from his hair. Cameron swipes his hand across Greyson's bare chest, gliding his fingers over his neck and up his jaw. Greyson lifts his chin to welcome Cameron's hand in whatever position he would like, his lips pursed. Cameron traces the sharp jaw bone he loves to kiss so much. Too much.

"Why not?"

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” Greyson whispers. “Last time I almost got jumped. The only reason I didn’t was because you pulled me away and I proceeded to sleep with you in your room.”

“I like to think of that as a total success,” Cameron teases. Greyson rolls his eyes. “Come on … Just… come. For me?” Cameron wiggles his eyebrows, and Greyson scoffs.

“Why should I?”

“Because…” Cameron frowns, tracing back down his chest. “If you do get targeted, it means I get more mindblowing sex. And if you don’t get targeted, I can easily just… pull you aside for-”

“You are all about the sex,” Greyson laughs, but arches his back as Cameron’s hand dips below the sheets. “Such a man-whore.”

“Oh, absolutely. But at least I admit it,” Cameron chuckles, ducking into Greyson’s neck and leaving a soft kiss there. “If you don’t go, I won’t go. And we can spend the night here instead. Because this whole party thing sounds miserable if you’re not there.”

“You have to go, it’s your party,” Greyson scoffs, his Adam's apple bobbing as Cameron peppers more and more kisses. “I have stuff to do the next morning, and I don’t wanna have to deal with-“

“What kind of stuff?” Cameron questions, his teeth grazing Greyson’s ear, and his hand tracing Greyson’s thigh. Greyson shuts his mouth. Cameron smirks, pulling away and making eye contact. “Go on. What kind of stuff?”

“…my birthday,” Greyson confesses quietly. Cameron’s eyes light up with a mischief that Greyson has never seen before. “Oh, don’t start- this is not about to be a thing—“

“It’s a thing,” Cameron declares. “I didn’t realize you had a birthday. I figured you just… spawned.”

“Fuck off…” Greyson rolls his eyes, pushing Cameron by the chest. “No. I’m a real person with a mother and a birthday and a life outside of you.”

“Well your mother spawned an absolute monster,” Cameron murmurs.

“I hate you,” Greyson mumbles.

“That’s not what you were saying five minutes ago.”

Greyson smacks his chest. Cameron lowers himself back down, slowly connecting their lips again. Greyson’s mouth parts instantly, making way for his tongue, and his knees move outward to allow for as much space as Cameron desires between his legs. Teasing hands and warm touches slowly bring them back to the activities that were taking place prior to the conversation.

Pants and moans are like music to his ears. Greyson laces his fingers in Cameron’s hair and runs his nails along his back. Cameron lets a bead of sweat gather on his brow. This is his exertion. This is his gym-time.

“You should still come,” Cameron exhales against Greyson’s mouth. The man puffs out a breath, shaking his head. “To the party, I mean.”

“Oh,” Greyson frowns, pulling Cameron’s head down. “Shut the fuck up and kiss me.”

“I’m talking between kisses,” Cameron excuses.

Greyson crashes their mouths together roughly, and Cameron is forced to brace himself on Greyson’s headboard. Their lips fall apart nearly instantly. Greyson can’t help but think about how attractive he is from this angle. Sculpted, and beautiful, shiny with sweat and very focused.

“Well stop that,” Greyson huffs. “C’mere.”

Cameron lets Greyson pull him down, but instead of kissing his mouth, Greyson scatters some on his shoulder, biting into the skin.

Thank god for Luca and his crush on Rowan, because otherwise, the two of them would be in some deep shit right now.

Cameron keeps an eye on the clock, and Greyson an eye on his watch, waiting for Rowan’s ‘ *headed home!* ’ text. When it starts to feel like they are walking a thin line between secluded passion and exposed danger, Cameron finds it fit that he gets dressed again. Greyson himself pulls on some trousers to cover up, but lounges in his bed comfortably as Cameron hunts down his clothes.

“Your back is a wreck. Sorry,” Greyson murmurs, tucking an arm behind his head. Cameron looks to Greyson’s mirror, craning at his reflection to see the damage.

“Luckily you have… feminine hands?” Cameron tsks, pulling on his shirt. Greyson rolls his eyes. “No one will ask.”

“How many of them see you shirtless regularly?” Greyson asks back.

“You wanna know out of curiosity or jealousy?” Cameron asks back.

“I could never be jealous over you ,” Greyson scoffs. “We’re… I dunno. We’re a fling. Friends with benefits without the friends part.”

“Mhm,” Cameron nods to himself. “Well if you must know, we are very regularly nude around each other. Showers and stuff.” Greyson nods to himself, tracing over his chest. “Gotta say… not an attractive bunch.”

“I promise I’m not jealous. Go get on your knees for some random football boy,” Greyson waves. “Have fun.”

“I feel like I’ve more than proven that I’m not a bottom. I don’t kneel for shit.”

Greyson glances at his watch as a notification comes through.

Rowan: *getting the bill now, then we’ll be back. Wanna hang out with the crew @ the lounge tonight?*

Greyson sighs, reaching for his phone to text him back. Cameron watches quietly, sitting at Rowan’s desk to pull on socks and shoes.

“Will you at least consider showing up to the party?” Cameron asks quietly. Greyson flickered his attention up. “Please?”

His shoulders fell. He sends back his affirmative text to Rowan and sets aside his phone. He stands from his bed, shuffling over so he stands between Cameron’s knees. The man in front of him slouches as Greyson wound him up in a gentle touch.

“I won’t make any promises,” Greyson prefaces. “But I’ll think about it.”

“Good enough,” Cameron nods curtly, his dimple appearing on his cheek with the lift of the corner of his mouth. Greyson swipes his tongue over his lower lip, playing with Cameron’s hair so it sits more naturally on his head. “Do you have any good birthday plans?”

“Not sure yet…” Greyson hums. “But if I happen to have an opening… I will be sure to let you know.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” Cameron says back, tipping his chin up. “We have a bit of a schedule going.”

“I’d hate to disrupt your schedule for my birthday…” Greyson rolls his eyes, leaning down and tucking a soft kiss to Cameron’s mouth. “You need to leave.”

“Do I?” Cameron murmurs, gripping Greyson’s hip roughly. Greyson nods, but doesn’t pull away, giving him a second kiss, tipping into his body. “You don’t seem to want me to.”

“Rowan will be home soon,” Greyson says back, kissing the corner of his mouth. “And I need to shower. You are gross.”

“Mhm.”

Greyson knows any germs on Cameron's hands have already done their damage. Their mouths, their swapped saliva and shared kisses will certainly land him with a cold if Cameron happened to carry one. But Greyson feels grimy regardless from the sweat and spit and a messy bedroom. He can’t seem to pull away, though. Cameron is simply magnetic. He’s addictive. He’s the treat of this marvelous Halloween-y holiday.

“You don’t have any excuses this time if you get caught,” Greyson murmurs against his mouth. Cameron sighs, frowning. “And there will be Hell to pay if Rowan sees you in here.”

“I know, I know,” Cameron pouts. “But I’m having fun. Why can’t I just have a little fun?”

“Because your version of fun is going to cause a lot of trouble for the both of us,” Greyson hums, swiping his hand through Cameron’s hair one last time, patting his cheek. “Okay. Go. Get out.”

“So formal,” Cameron groans, but stands. Greyson never gets tired of the way his stance slowly rises, his confidence making him appear taller than he is, and his sheer broadness of his shoulders, his gait, his everything , making Greyson swoon… “I will see you tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Greyson says back. Cameron scoffs, leaning over Greyson’s shoulder to press one final kiss to his mouth. Greyson mindlessly takes it and walks away. Cameron simply shakes his head and leaves.

Perfect timing, because Rowan appears in the doorway only ten minutes later.

Greyson still hasn't showered, but he has put his clothes on properly and fixed his appearance to look a little less rough. He's also made his bed and worked on sorting out the bedroom.

"How was your date?" Greyson asks, biting his cheek. Rowan flung himself onto his own bed.

"It's not a date, idiot."

"It was absolutely a date," Greyson deadpans. "No need to be ashamed. You two would make a good couple, I think-"

"It's not a date!" Rowan exclaims. "You are so fucking annoying- how would you feel if I just asked if every person you spent time with was a romantic partner? Oh Santiago? Are you dating Santiago?"

"Rather die. I've seen his laundry habits."

Delta Phi reeks of alcohol and sweat upon their first step through the door. The second sensory stimulation to hit them is the blasting electropop music that doesn't at all work with the theme of the event, nor the people invited. Almost every time Greyson has shown up to one of these, the music matches that of the playlist of, well, frat boys. Vulgar rap by shitty soundcloud artists, maybe a couple radio songs and something circulating on social media, but otherwise… not this.

This is quite possibly the most chaotic party Greyson has ever seen.

Greyson's attempt at a costume is weak, but he also hates the secondhand embarrassment of playing glorified dress up in front of a hoard of other adults. He simply threw on a red and white shirt, an old pair of glasses, and a red beanie and called himself Wally. It's been a good six years since he wore his glasses– he's not that blind, so he simply refused to wear them– meaning he was experiencing one hell of a migraine as he sees the distant world for the first time in a while.

When Greyson was young, he loved Halloween. It wasn't quite the spectacle that Americans made– a little less commercialized, at least– but it was still fun. It was his one chance to get out of the house like a normal kid. He would dress up in all sorts of personas and march out onto the streets with his older brother, who was the designated caretaker. Wes hated playing babysitter, but the sweets made up for it. Greyson would just quietly skip alongside Wes and his friends around the neighborhoods, and they would be out for hours , and when they came home, Mom made them hand over their candy to clean and told

them to go shower, but otherwise… it felt normal.

At least, close to it.

Greyson's mother would break out in stress hives at the sight of this party. Greyson can barely walk down the hall without bumping shoulders and feeling masked party goers grind on each other. The snack bowls are out and uncovered without serving tools. Drinks, too. It's like they were asking for someone to get drugged. This was a little much.

Greyson holds onto Santiago's sleeve as they squeeze their way to the backyard where they can exist comfortably without the hot breath of strangers creeping down their neck. Santiago grabs them both a drink from the cooler before they sit on the steps, cheers-ing to their adventurous outing.

"I'm already tired," Greyson groans as he twists off the cap of the beer. It seemed like the only available drink that he didn't worry about being flu-ridden or drugged. "Why did we come again?"

"I dunno. You're the one who said you were up to it," Santiago scoffs. "Idiot."

"I'll give you that one."

Greyson sits back, swigging his beer and looking around at all the college kids living it up this evening in their costumes. Girls who must be frigid in their lack of clothing, boys who somehow seem like they tried even less than Greyson did, people who took the "costume party" title to heart and went all out– they all seem to be loving it. Greyson wonders what it is in his stupid little brain that makes him despise these types of things. The only reason he came in the first place was to save himself the complaints from Cameron tomorrow.

"You think Rowan and Luca are hooking up in a closet yet?" Santiago asks, making Greyson sputter. Santiago smirks. "I knew it!"

"What do you-"

"Luca and Ro. They're a thing, right? Just tell me. Don't lie. It will hurt my feelings."

"I don't know-" Greyson cringes. Santiago rolls his eyes. "Seriously! I'm not sure. I know Luca is practically in love with him, but– I don't know… I'm not even sure Rowan… likes guys." Santiago is suddenly

rigid and furrows his eyebrows. “I mean-”

“You’re this guy's closest friend, practically. You live together, and you don’t even know the people he hooks up with? You’re asking for Luca’s feelings to get hurt!”

“It’s not like that-” Greyson insists. “I-I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I’m an idiot. I am so blind. I have no idea who Rowan likes, but-but I think he likes Luca? I mean– surely these… these escapades are dates, right?”

“Make up your mind, man!”

Greyson groans, setting his head back against the bannister. This is too much pressure for him. This is why he stays out of drama, and even more importantly: out of relationships. This whole “Cameron” thing is just that– a thing. A fling. A barely-there cling. They are not a couple, nor will they ever be much more than enemies with benefits. This conversation is precisely why.

Speak of the devil: Greyson’s eyes lift and find Cameron exiting the backdoor. He’s accompanied by Rowan and a couple of their friends– none of which Greyson knows.

They make brief eye contact. Cameron somehow seems like he has the laziest costume of them all– black tight jeans, a silk red button down (which is barely buttoned, might Greyson add), and some devil horns on his head. He might have a hint of dark eyeliner on, but Greyson can’t tell in this poor lighting.

Dammit, he’s hot.

Greyson skims his appearance briefly. His exposed chest. His hands dawned with a few silver rings. His tight jeans that fit him just right. Cameron looks away from Greyson’s face and gets a cocky smirk on his stupid face, the group of people walking down the stairs between where Santiago and Greyson were sitting. Greyson swallows the lump in his throat. Rowan looks over his shoulder and smiles, waving at them. Santiago narrows his eyes at Greyson’s roommate, then at Greyson.

“If he’s here, where the hell is Luca?”

Shit.

“I hate when you’re right,” Greyson huffs, pushing himself to his feet,

and Santiago quickly on his heels. They march onwards back into the zoo of the frat house in search of their friend.

The two scour the house high and low for Luca. Them calling out his name doesn't do much– it's way too loud to hear themselves think. Greyson's head is spinning, personally, with overstimulation and exhaustion. He pulls out his phone to text Luca a short where r u , then Rowan, with where is Luca . He doesn't get a response from either of them.

He climbs the stairs two at a time in an effort to check upstairs, maybe find him in a secluded hallway. Instead, he finds another floor bursting at the seams with bodies.

Greyson's phone buzzes, and he pulls it out again.

***Cameron** : i like the waldo get-up*

Now? Really?

***Greyson** : You don't look all that awful.*

***Greyson:** also, it's Wally*

He looks between his phone and his surroundings as he texts– Cameron lays in on the e-flirting instantly.

***Cameron** : you are just too kind to me. Personally: Wally and Waldo are both bad names. I like you as Greyson :)*

***Cameron** : thank u for coming.*

***Cameron** : maybe I'll steal u from the crowd for a few?*

Greyson pockets his phone. He doesn't have the energy to think about hooking up right now. He knocks on a bathroom door, only to have a pair of women call back that it was occupied. Greyson moves on. Unless Luca landed himself a threesome with a couple of sorority girls, he will assume he is not in there.

Greyson returns downstairs and scans the floor for Santiago. For once, the glasses come in handy: he spots Santiago across the living room. Greyson shakes his head. Santiago frowns.

Neither of them found him.

Greyson turns to keep searching and faceplants into a man

significantly taller than him.

“Woah there, feisty. Too personal,” Aiden scoffs, shouldering Greyson roughly to toss him back a few steps. Greyson stumbles and looks up at him with a frown. “I’m not a queer. I don’t like you like that.”

“Come up with some better insults. Queer isn’t a bad word anymore,” Greyson rolls his eyes and goes to walk around him. Aiden held his arm out to block his way.

“Can I help you?” Aiden asks, sidestepping into Greyson’s way. Greyson scowls. “I don’t think I deserved the sass, nor the unwarranted sexual assault-”

“Me bumping into you isn’t-”

“Shut your damn mouth,” Aiden barks. Greyson grits his teeth. “Who the fuck invited you, anyways? No one wants you here, Hampton. You and that fucking bitch that follows Ro around like his shadow. You guys are fucking freaks, you know that? Give the guy some damn space.”

Greyson’s face fell.

“Where’s Luca?” Greyson deadpans.

“Oh, you’re so scary when you’re serious,” Aiden fake tremors. “I don’t know. Hopefully pissing his pants in a corner, or better even: walking the fuck home, where he belongs. None of you annoying pussies belong here. Some of us actually did something to get into this school other than be a token minority with a sob story-”

“Cry about it. We’re both in the damn university. I don’t know what got your panties in a twist, but I promise, you are the last person I would ever want to interact with on this campus,” Greyson flashed a fake smile. “Good luck on your power trip.”

He ducks into a crowd of people and narrowly escapes Aiden’s grasp for further argument. The damn guy is just a walking plea for attention. Greyson clambers through the hoard until he completely loses Aiden, and eventually, ends up outside again. He doesn’t get very far before he’s stopped again.

Cameron.

He’s stood alone at the bottom of the stairs to the porch. He’s leaning

against the railing, looking down at his phone, taking sips from a red solo cup. The lighting from the moon and the porchlight hit him (and his silk shirt) just right, outlining his shoulders, a glint of light in his hair, his eyes…

God, he's stupidly pretty.

At the slam of the screen door shutting behind Greyson, Cameron looks up. He smiles to himself, looking Greyson over again.

"You're still stuck on your first drink?" Cameron asks with a small smirk.

"Haven't had time for a second," Greyson confesses, looking down and taking a long swig. Cameron smiles wider, like he was proud. He studies Greyson's face for imperfections, but finds none. "Barely had time for the first, between Luca going missing and your buddy threatening to kick me out."

"Dammit," Cameron groans, finishing his drink. "Which one this time?"

"Who do you think? Aiden. I swear, they're the worst," Greyson frowns. "Why are you out here alone? Aren't you one of the most popular people here?"

"Well," Cameron blinks a few times. "I am mildly tipsy, so Rowan is getting me water, and Bryce and-and Liam are about to pull me into a game of slap-cup, so I am getting some air before I have to do that bullshit."

"Sounds like you're going to be gone within the hour," Greyson determines, looking over his shoulder. "Listen- have you seen Luca? He's been missing all night. I know he came with Ro, but I didn't see them together with you, and-"

"Give it a rest, man. He doesn't like you like that," someone says, clapping Greyson on the shoulder. Greyson jumps, looking over to find Aiden hovering again. Cameron instantly stands up straighter and blinks a few times, his face going slack. "Do me a favor, you and your little fucking possey of gays… quit flirting with my friends. He's not gonna fuck you."

Greyson stuffs down the comment he so desperately wanted to make.

"I wasn't flirting with-"

“Did I ask for you to make a fucking case?” Aiden asks, giving Greyson a good shove by the shoulder so he stumbles down the two steps from the porch. Greyson narrowly catches his footing. Cameron is frozen in place. “No, I didn’t. So walk away. Leave my friends alone. Better yet, just fucking leave.”

Greyson goes to make an argument, but he decides to be smarter than that, and stay silent. He just nods and takes a few steps away. Aiden turns to Cameron, raising an eyebrow.

“You good, man? Let me get you another drink-”

Greyson didn’t have the energy to be pissed. He was still more concerned about Luca.

He wanders the backyard, glancing at each of the groups of people in an effort to find his friend, or even Rowan, but to no avail. He walks along the fence line, doing a full lap of the backyard, and comes back with nothing. He starts to circle the perimeter of the house, only to finally find Santiago and Luca against the fence on the side of the yard.

“Hey, you alright?” Greyson frowns, patting Luca on the arm. “You disappeared on us.”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing. Drop it,” Luca says with a huff. Greyson frowns.

“Woah there, attitude. What did I do-”

“I said drop it!” Luca insists. Greyson recoils slightly, scanning him over. Luca’s face is pink, and his arms are crossed, and he’s avoiding eye contact with all of them. Greyson then looks to Santiago, who also won’t look at him.

“Okay…” Greyson nods slowly. “What… What can I do to make this better on everyone? Round of drinks? Walk us home? Your call.”

“I-I don’t know…” Luca groans, running a hand over his face. “Let me sit and think for a minute.”

“Yeah…” Greyson rocks on his heels. “Yeah, of course.”

Greyson considers hunting down his roommate, pinning him to a wall by his throat and forcing a confession out of him about what happened. He also considers marching back over to Cameron and

punching him in the nose for just standing there when Aiden was being a dick. And most of all, he would love to return home. Clearly this night did not go as optimistically planned.

The three of them sit against the fence in the grass. Greyson watches the drinking game from afar as Cameron pounds shot after shot. He drunkenly stumbles into his friends with loud laughter and a hand running through his wild hair, held back by devil horns. Greyson looks down at his half-empty drink and frowns. He's tired.

Greyson remembers being a kid and loving the evening of Halloween, the countdown to his birthday, the excitement in the house. Mum always baked a cake. Dad was always excited to celebrate. Wesley was nicer to him. Greyson remembers the clock striking midnight, and they sing happy birthday around his pile of candy. He would make a wish on the candle that lit his jack-o-lantern. They would play board games at the kitchen table until they were falling asleep in their seats, and they would laugh until all the neighborhood kids were in bed, too.

It's not what it used to be, that's for sure.

Because Greyson looks down at his phone, at his home screen, and he cracks a sad smile. It was his last birthday with Dad. The five of them were crunched around Dad's wheelchair. They all smiled at the camera like a loved one was behind it— the only thing behind it was the Halloween decorations that held it upright— and an automatic timer took their photo. Phoebe is a toddler. Greyson and Wesley are teenagers. They are happy. They're a family.

He should text Wes.

He opens his texts and starts to type something out but stops in his tracks.

Their most recent text was March 30th— 8 months ago. Wes saying *you coming home for summer?* And Greyson replying with a thumbs up. The conversation died there.

They haven't talked much since Dad passed. Maybe that's a good thing.

"Can we do something?" Greyson asks quietly, staring off into the direction of the emptying drinking game— the cups are scattered everywhere, and drunken college kids are laughing, and just as quickly as he appeared, Cameron is gone. "I…I would rather do

something. As in, the three of us."

"I'm down," Santiago sighs, looking at Luca. He nods once. "Right. Let's go."

"I'll tell Ro I'm leaving. Meet you out front," Greyson huffs, pushing himself to his feet. They both nod and slowly gather themselves.

Greyson waters the plants with the remainder of his beer and tosses it in the recycling. He wove through people to clamber the back stairs again and ducks inside. All it takes is a quick scan before he finds Rowan, hovering at the kitchen counter with some guys and a drink.

"Hey, I'm headed out," Greyson declares to his friend. "Give me your keys. I don't want you driving tonight with how much you're drinking."

"You alright?" Rowan asks, blindly patting his pockets.

"Fine," Greyson deadpans. "Call me if you need a ride."

"Greyson-" Rowan sighs. "If this is about Luca-"

"None of my business!" Greyson declares loudly before walking away.

Quite honestly: he didn't care. It's not his relationship. It's not his feelings. If they want to emotionally fuck themselves over, he hopes they enjoy it while it lasts. He won't be getting in the middle though. He can see that "the middle" is the last place he is wanted.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, sliding through people with muttered apologies and pleas to get through. Most of them ignore him. Some are as rude as to shoulder-check him as he passes. Others are kind enough to flatten their bodies against their partners to make room. Greyson didn't care much for the intention. He was just glad to get through.

Until he is on the other side, approaching the front door. An end is in sight. He can taste freedom.

His eye caught a flash of red, followed by a fluid flow of white. Like magnetized, his attention is drawn in that direction. Drawn to Cameron. He hates to bail on him, hates to completely void his plans for the night, but between Luca and how exhausting all this is-

Greyson's mind goes blank, as he instead finds Satan himself with his

back against a wall, his hand in some blond girl's hair, and their mouths flushed together like some horrific attempt at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Her angel wings are crooked from Cameron's hands. Her halo, too. Greyson doesn't see much else other than her back, her figure, and Cameron's exposed chest, covered by her dainty little hand.

It's like he's stuck there, observing, wondering.

How often has Cameron done this— gone straight from one hookup to another, making Greyson a petri dish of Cameron's roster of "fuckables". Greyson wonders how many times he's kissed Cameron, expecting a clean mouth and an untouched tongue, only to be getting sloppy seconds, to be passed on the spit of his prior fling.

Greyson wonders how much of their quiet fun in his bedroom was belonging to someone else, too. Because even if it wasn't exclusive, even if they were never personal, it felt wrong. It felt dirty. It felt whorish, and bacterial, and infectious, and fuck he needs a shower.

"Her name is Allie."

Greyson looks over and finds Aiden, once again standing at his side. This time, though, he brought backup. Liam and Bryce stand with him, as if all three were needed to kick the shit out of Greyson. The Brit swallows a lump in his throat and nods.

"She's very nice. President's list. Sorority girl. Rich. Well accomplished. Beautiful. She's every guys dream, and she picked him," Aiden continues. Greyson's jaw tenses. "And better yet… he picked her."

He picked her.

"I was hoping I was just seeing things— some extra long stares, maybe something a little too friendly, but it's gotten obvious. You have a thing for Cameron, and it's not gonna fucking happen. He wouldn't let it happen, and quite honestly, neither would we," Aiden takes a step closer. Greyson inches back but bumps into the door frame. "I'm going to give you one final warning. Stay away from my friends. Stay away from my frat. Stay away from the games, and definitely stay away from Cameron. I see a toe out of line and your ass is ours. Got it?"

If it wasn't for Aiden's breath in his face, and for three abhorrently large men standing over him, maybe Greyson would give some snide comment back— something about Cameron choosing "deez nuts", or

telling Aiden to brush his teeth, or reminding him that he is not King of the universe.

But he must admit. He's scared. He can tell they're serious.

"Can I leave now?" Greyson asks with a slight tremble to his voice. Aiden scoffs out a laugh and gives him one hard shove in the direction of the front door.

Greyson doesn't waste a second in leaving.

His mind is scattered into a million places, and he's sick thinking about them all. About Rowan, and Luca, and about Santiago, about Cameron, and about his stupid fucking friends. About Allie, and how good Cameron looked with her. They had coordinating costumes. They kissed like they knew each other's mouths well. They soaked into the wall like it was their commonplace.

Greyson sped toward Rowan's car, unlocking it rapidly. He runs a hand through his hair.

"Took you a while," Santiago comments as Greyson tossed the keys at him. "I'm driving?"

"Like Hell if I am."

Santiago focuses on his friend as Greyson takes quick steps in the direction of the passenger seat. Greyson tugs on the handle, but it doesn't budge. Santiago hits the unlock button again and pulls it open. Greyson glanced up one last time, and he caught Liam's eye.

That alone is enough of a threat.

Greyson sinks into the seat and keeps his mouth shut. Luca seemingly does the same thing. Santiago looks between the two of them, uncertain, confused, and wondering what the hell he's supposed to do in this situation. Its not his car, and it's not his business, but seeing his two best friends, his two closest allies, both dead silent, avoiding eye contact, avoiding it all…

Something was horrifically wrong.

Back at the dorms, Greyson goes to change and shower first. He needs to get the Delta Phi Flu off his skin, and he truly wanted to gargle bleach with the amount of disgusting grime he felt caked onto his body, in his mouth. He brushes his teeth in the shower until his gums

bleed. Mouthwash burns. His skin is red hot and slightly swollen from the sheer burning temperature of the shower water. He scrubbed his skin until it hurt.

Cameron is not worth his hurt, though. Not at all. Because he was nothing more than a mindless fling, a stupid hookup. A routine. He was not something special, something his. They were never exclusive. They were never eachother's. Greyson knew this.

Why he never thought of this as a possibility, he's not sure.

When he's clean, and changed, and his head of hair is towel dried, he joins Luca and Santiago in their room, finding them already halfway through the first episode of *Over the Garden Wall.* Luca was laying on his bed, changed out of his costume and instead into a comfortable looking sweater-sweatpants combo. Santiago was crunched onto Luca's bed too, propped against the wall, silently passing a bowl of popcorn and a jar of candy between them. They both look up at the sight of their door sliding open.

"Any space?" Greyson asks softly. They both nod. Luca pulls his legs up to make space, and Santiago moves down so Greyson can fit between them.

Maybe he does belong in the middle. Just… not how he thought.

They give Greyson the candy and popcorn to hold between them, and they all stare off at the TV placed upon Santiago's desk for easy viewing. No one asks. No one talks. They just share their silence and their snacks, soft laughter and coos over the cutesy (and creepy) cartoon.

Greyson's phone is blowing up with texts. Rowan, and Cameron, and Rowan again. His Mum wishes him a happy birthday. Greyson turns his phone over, face down, and ignores the vibrations.

"You give me Wirt vibes," Luca mumbles from where he lay, popping a piece of candy in his mouth. Greyson raises an eyebrow. "Know-it-all bastard who is still annoyingly good and caring."

"Thank you?" Greyson smiles to himself. "I think?"

"You're welcome."

Greyson shrinks deeper between them. He feels safe. He feels secure.

There is no trick or treating this Halloween. There's no sweetness and bubbling over joy. No Wes, and no Dad, and no Phoebe. None of Mum's hysterical cleaning (well– maybe a bit of it, given the state of Greyson's gums). The only trick was Cameron. The only treat was his friends. And Greyson supposes, that will have to suffice.

Chapter End Notes

This was fun. I enjoyed writing this. Yes very much. Very fun. Mhm. Oh rowan and cam, the toxic masculinity of it all... You boys are a walking travesty.

Anyways... HAPPY HALLOWEEN!! I hope you all have a safe and exciting holiday. I will unfortunately be spending mine at home with the baby, my sister in law, and my mom, who all have RSV. the guilt is real, knowing I gave it to them. oh the parallels between me and greyson...

As always-- keep an eye on my twitter for an idea of when updates will come @ hayloftown

Until next time!
Hayl

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

On his bad side.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: this chapter handles two potentially triggering topics: 1) drugs / drugging at a party, and 2) physical bullying. If either of these topics are troublesome to you, please consider not reading.

Neither of these topics are graphic or violently depicted. Please be sure to view tags before reading anyways, though <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Greyson slept in Santiago and Luca's room that night.

Not on purpose, necessarily– he was just tired, and that's where he happened to end up. He crashed right there in Luca's bed midway through the third season of *Rick and Morty* , and completely slept through his first class the next morning. The only reason he woke up when he did was because of his phone ringing, and Santiago yelling at him to answer it.

"I'm up, I'm up," Greyson groans, pressing himself upright and running a hand over his face. "What time is it?"

"Like, 9:30," Santiago huffs, pacing around with a stack of notecards in his hands, mouthing answers to himself. "And I have a massive exam at noon, so if you could kindly find a way to shut your phone up, that would be appreciated."

"Sorry," Greyson sighs, picking up his phone and scrolling through notifications– there's hundreds of them. Jesus Christ. He clicks on the thread of messages waiting for him, finding a slew of *happy birthday!!* texts.

Shit.

How does he forget his own birthday?

"How did Luca seem this morning?" Greyson asks as he regathers

himself, standing from Luca's bed and shuffling toward the door. Santiago shrugs.

"Not bad, not great. Quieter than normal but he didn't seem distraught…"

"And we still have no idea what happened?" He gets another shrug in response. "Alright… Well… good luck on your exam."

"Thanks. Good luck on your… whatever."

Greyson nods and walks out, shuffling down the hall to his own dorm. He swipes his keycard and pushes it open, finding Rowan passed out in his bed, still in his outfit from last night, laying on top of the covers. Greyson blinks a few times and shakes his head, shuffling toward his own bed. He dug through his backpack for his laptop and opened up a tab for his course that he skipped, checking for any missed assignments. On the side of the page lists a post sent out by the professor:

Due to lack of attendance in today's class, I ask that you all complete the assigned essay by Tuesday to make up for attendance credit. Those who were present today, you will be awarded an automatic 100%.

Greyson mutters some curses under his breath and closes his laptop again, rubbing his eyes.

He sunk back into his pillows, staring off at his wall with a scowl. Slowly but surely, the events of last night return to him. Cameron's betrayal. Rowan and Luca's fight (break up? Something happened. He's not sure what). Watching cartoons until well past midnight, and not nearly enough alcohol to have the headache he does.

Slowly but surely, Greyson goes through his notifications– hundreds of posts on his Facebook timeline from all his friends and family who he doesn't know all that well, like distant cousins, great uncles and aunties, his grandparents who don't realize they can send an international text, so forth and so on. Friends from home posted something on their Instagram story (to which he is obligated to reshare onto his own if he doesn't want to look like a total ungrateful asshole). He received lots of texts from the closer friends and family overseas– his older cousin Tori who set him up on a date with his middle school crush sent him a short text with an ungodly amount of emojis, and his childhood best friend sent him this ridiculously long text pronouncing his forever undying love for his best friend and appreciation of his friendship– cute stupid things that make him

smile.

He has a text from Wesley.

***Wes** : Happy birthday Grey. Birthdays never fail to remind me that you're not the little shit that mum brought home from the hospital that day. Hope you're hangin in there. See you at christmas?*

Greyson chews the skin off his lips with a frown. He hesitates to send a text back– a *thank you* , a *miss you* , a *see you soon* ? What would be appropriate for this?

Wesley tries. Greyson won't fault him for his lack of attempt. They were never all too close in the first place– it's hard to be friendly in such a sterile environment– but they didn't get along as kids, and then had one really rough falling out upon Dad's death. Neither of them recovered.

Birthdays are always tense. Maybe Wesley is remembering Greyson's homecoming as an infant, but Greyson is remembering his first birthday after Dad's death. Wesley didn't speak to him. In fact, he went out of his way to be sure to not be in town during the day. He ignored Mum's calls. He told everyone to leave him the hell alone. When Mum scolded him for being a pessimist, Wesley insisted that there was no reason to celebrate Greyson after he killed his father.

They never recovered. Even if Wesley tries, the attempts will prove futile.

His phone rings again, and Greyson groans.

"Hello?" He pins the phone to his ear, running a hand over his face.

"Now, Greyson, it is very late for you to only now be getting up. You realize I've been calling you all morning in an effort to just wish my middle son a very happy birthday, and I hear you with that groggy hung-over voice-"

"Mum," Greyson sighs.

"Did you go out partying last night? After all this time, I figured I had finally raised a son to be more cognizant of his surroundings, and Halloween parties are not the place you need to be at a time like this, with RSV and the Flu spreading like mad and-"

"Mum."

“Oh Grey I worry about you and your self-destructive habits. I do. You worked far too hard to end up as a college drop out, sick on the streets of a strange city with no way home-”

“ *Mum* ,” Greyson cuts her off, and she goes quiet. “I’m fine. I didn’t even do anything last night. Just stayed in with a few friends and watched some TV and ate some candy.” Mum is still silent, unsure on whether or not she should believe him. “You there?”

“I’m here,” she exhales. “I just… I get so worried about you, darling. I want to see you happy, but I want to see you thrive more. And sometimes they can’t go hand in hand.”

“I understand,” he shakes his head, rolling his eyes. He picks at his nails, pinning the phone between his ear and his shoulder. He picks at the underside of his nail beds despite them being perfectly clean.

“How's your birthday going, dear?” She sighs, finally settling. Greyson bites back his first instinctual comment: a scoff. She doesn’t need to worry more.

“Really good,” Greyson lies. “I’m not doing much, but… you know. Relaxing. Spending time with friends. Might go get ice cream or something tonight.”

Lie. Lie lie lie. None of it is true, and his gut twists thinking about it. His mother doesn’t deserve lies, but he fears telling her the truth: telling her that his hookup was hooking up with someone else, and that his friends are feuding, and that the friends that aren’t feuding are too busy to spend time with him. He’s too anxious about the potential viruses swirling in his immune system to think about leaving the dorms. He’s already ready to adopt quarantine procedures, because God Forbid Cameron gave him something Allie had. He should probably go into the campus health center for a check up and blood work, right?

Right.

“That sounds lovely, darling,” Mum coos. “I’m sorry for being so anxious. I know it’s overwhelming on you. I love you so much, I hope you know.”

“I know,” Greyson smiles sadly to himself. “I love you too.”

“Okay, before your sister tears my head off, she wants to speak to you.”

“Love you Mumma,” Greyson says before the rustle of the phone passing. He is met with a high pitched, feminine, sweet voice he adores.

“Grey,” she huffs. “Did you get the gift I sent you for your birthday?”

“Not yet,” Greyson laughs. “How are you, Pheebs?”

“Annoyed. You haven’t called me in days . You know how long that is, don’t you? Days of just Mummy.”

“Hey!”

“You be nice to Mum,” Greyson scolds. “She is trying her best.”

“She made me wear gloves to go trick or treating yesterday,” Phoebe deadpans.

“Well, what did you dress up as? Maybe it matched!”

“It didn’t,” Phoebe says, a scowl evident in her voice. “I was Daphne from Scooby Doo with stupid blue rubber gloves and one of the surgical masks.”

Greyson bites his cheek and frowns.

“And I couldn’t even have you talk her out of it, because you didn’t answer your phone. It was, like, 3PM for you, Greyson! The heck were you doing at 3PM that made you too busy to talk to your little sister?”

“You are getting such an attitude in your old age,” Greyson says to change the subject. “You’re eight and you act like you’re 15.”

“Mummy is aging me.”

“You’re aging yourself by saying things like Mum is aging you ,” Greyson sighs, looking up at the ceiling. “Look, I get it. I know it’s hard, but pity her a little and do the best you can to please her. She does it all out of love.”

“I know,” Phoebe murmurs. “I got a lot of sweets for Halloween. I got like two million pieces, I swear-“

Grief ages you.

Phoebe was only 2 when Dad died. She didn’t have a chance to know him. She never had the opportunity to feel that “birthday excitement”,

or the halloween fun, or the way every event felt like something special for them. Phoebe never had the fear of coming home from school with the sniffles, being forced to not see Dad for a week straight. She never had to witness any of it.

But she had to witness the grief. She was raised in the aftermath, and God does trauma age you. Not like fine wine, but rather like sour milk that sat out in a hot car for two days straight. She grew up a nihilist. She grew up knowing and understanding death better than any child should. She is eight years old with the mind of a teenager and the emotional intelligence of a therapist.

But it's the little things that ground them in her childhood. There's still time to fix it. She still has a chance. She went trick or treating last night, and in her little 8 year old brain, she can't visualize just how much candy she got. 50 pieces? 100 pieces? A million pieces? It all looks the same. Because she's eight .

And Greyson isn't. He sees the world in total clarity. He can count just fine. Greyson was not the only treat on Cameron's Halloween night. Just one in a million.

"How about I take a walk down to the mail distribution hall and see what you guys sent me?" Greyson offers when there's a break of silence. His sister cheers an affirmative. "Okay, okay. Adventure time."

Greyson pulls on a jacket and a hat— the forecast said it would be frigid today. He keeps the phone to his ear as he strolls into town and to the mail services hall, which is a bit of a hike from his dorm. Phoebe rattles on about how excited she was to give him his gift, and how awesome it is. Greyson just smiles.

"Alright, alright, don't spoil the surprise," Greyson hums as he climbs the steps, his breath visible as he pants. "Is Mum still there? Maybe she wants to hear me open it too."

"Yeah. Her and Wes are doin' something in the kitchen."

Greyson's stomach drops.

"Yeah?" Greyson pulls the door open to find a nearly empty entryway. "What are they doin'?"

"I dunno. Maybe making you a cake!"

Greyson walks up to the counter and smiles at the student operating it.

“Greyson Hampton,” he says quietly, rifling through his wallet for his student ID. They take it and scan the barcode.

“Two packages and some letters. Give me a minute.”

Greyson sways side to side as he waits. He hears Phoebe approach the kitchen, Wes’ voice getting nearer with every step. It’s been a while since Greyson heard his brother speak. They haven’t spoken to one another in probably three years. Before Greyson left for America. All Greyson got was a “ *good luck* ” . Before that, probably another three years. When Greyson is home for the summers and holidays, Wesley is coincidentally always just missing him. Wesley is good at one thing, and that's holding a grudge.

His brother has somehow become more British. That, or it's just been that long since Greyson listened to a non-American speak. In some awful, terrible way, Wes sounds exactly like their father. A slight rasp to his tone that only comes with years of stress (and maybe some cigarettes), a thick accent that isn’t as southern British like Mum, Phoebe, or Greyson’s, and a hint of their father’s overly wordy wisdom.

“Wes, Greyson says hello!” Phoebe shouts. There's a hush that falls over the other end of the phone. “What?” Greyson bites his cheek. “Okay… Grey do you have your presents yet?”

“Greyson?” the woman at the desk calls. Greyson lifts his attention and nods, gathering his belongings and stepping out of the way for the person in line behind him.

“I got them now,” Greyson confirms, shuffling over to a bench to flip through mail– he got some newsletters from the school (a waste of paper if you ask him), some advertisements in regards to voting (which he can’t do, given the fact that he’s not a citizen), and some notices about his health insurance. “Okay, I’m opening the box-”

“No! Open the parcel from me first. The-the one with the unicorn stickers on it. Please!” Phoebe exclaims. “Mummy! He’s opening the gifts!”

“Oh, bring the phone here, darling!” Mum calls back. Phoebe scampers to her side, and Wes’ voice is in full clarity suddenly. The phone is put on speaker-mode as Greyson opens it. “Which one are

you opening?"

"The one I sent! I told him to open the unicorn one!" Phoebe exclaims. "Are you opening mine?"

"Yes, I'm opening yours," Greyson chuckles, peeling open the box and plucking the hand-drawn card off the top. In Phoebe's curly handwriting, it reads: ' *To Grey, from Feebee…* '. "Pheebs, you spelt your own name wrong."

"You try having my name," Phoebe huffs. "Just read it!"

"I'm reading, I'm reading-" Greyson shakes his head with a smile. " *Grey, happy berthday! I miss you so so so so so so so much. I hope America is as fun as the pickshers look. I hope we get to visit you soon, or you come back soon. I love you. Happy berthday. Love, Feebee.* " Greyson frowns slightly. Her handwriting has gotten so mature over the years. He recalls his first birthday away from them, all he got was a scribbled drawing with a horrific butchering of their names on it. "I love it. Thank you, Pheebs."

"Now look at the gift!"

Greyson sets the card aside and rifles through the box of trinkets his sister sent. He knows that Mum purchased much of it for him, but as per usual, it is compiled of Phoebe's thoughts, Phoebe's memories, of him. Chocolates and sweets from England, some little things from home– mainly photos and a few little mementos from his bedroom that he forgot to pack– and most importantly, a string necklace with some beads on it, handcrafted by his little sister.

"This necklace is beautiful, Phoebe," Greyson coos, examining it with a sad smile.

"It's all our initials! In order! Daddy is GH, like you! Mummy is AH. Wes is WH. You're also GH, and I'm PH!"

"You're so smart," Greyson hums, thumbing at the letter beads, each set of initials broken up by some sort of charm– hearts, and pearls, and rainbow pieces. It's goofy, and hideous, and so, so perfect. "I love it. This is the best present I could ever ask for. I'll put it on right now."

"Really? I told you! I told you Mum! He *will* wear it!"

Greyson is a man of his word and slides the string necklace over his head. He tucks it under his shirt for safe keeping though, glancing at

the other box.

“Am I allowed to open Mum’s present now?” Greyson asks. Phoebe hums an affirmative.

Greyson peels back the tape and pulls the box open, laughing at the silly things Mum sent him. Similar to Phoebe, he got a care package of British foods, some of which Greyson had mentioned missing lately. British mac and cheese, British jam, British cereals, and most importantly: British coffee. The box is fairly large– more stuff is buried under the foods. He opens it and finds a collection of photos, handwritten letters, and a little box wrapped in gift wrapping paper. He opens it and finds a silly watch– Greyson isn’t one for watches, but he thanks his mother anyways.

“Look at the other stuff, dear,” Mum insists.

Greyson does as told, scanning through the photos with a sad smile. Baby pictures. Photos of him and his Dad upon his first bath, and in the hospital, and basking in sunlight. Greyson skims the images with nostalgia.

He’s not sure what spoke to him, he’s not sure what influenced him to do so, but he turns over a photo, and he is struck with the delicate handwriting of his late father. Curled cursive under a inky pen– it was before he started to lose his hand control. In the progression of his disease, he wasn’t capable of signing a paper, nevermind writing. Greyson isn’t entirely sure how he knows the handwriting is his Dad’s. He just… does.

“Every time I think I’ve finished finding things in the attic, I just dig up some more stuff,” Mum says gently. “I was just talking to Wesley. He… He wrote you boys some letters when he was first diagnosed. I found them all in this box that had a mountain of dust on it, and it was a bit water damaged, so I’m sorry if it’s smelly-”

“It’s great,” Greyson murmurs, looking at the letters he had scanned past earlier. There’s a handful of papers. Greyson wonders how much his father wrote prior to his loss of fine-motor function “These are all from him?”

“Yeah– I have some here at the house too. We can look through them all together when you’re home next. But I wanted to make sure you got the ones addressed to you,” Mum says. Greyson chews his cheek, skimming the first few words on one of the letters. His handwriting is shakier than it was on the photos. “Just goes to show, he can’t stop

making it about him, now can he?"

Greyson laughs to himself, running a hand over his face.

"Old bastard can't just give it a rest," Greyson teases, his voice softer than intended. "Thank you, Mum. I love it. I'll… I'll have to go through them all later."

"I hope it's not too much, dear. I know it's hard-"

"No, no," Greyson swallows the lump in his throat. *Don't cry in public. That is unforgivable* . "It's great. Thank you."

Slowly, steadily, he packs all his things into one of the boxes and recycles the other to condense the amount of things he needs to bring home. He lets Phoebe continue rambling about Halloween, and Mum quiz him about his life, as he gets ready to return to the dorm. Checking the time, he's not entirely sure he'll make it to his next class.

He gathers his box under his arm, starting toward the door. One of the other patrons is leaving, too. They get to the door first. Greyson looks up and loses his breath.

Cameron.

How the hell he's awake after the binge drinking he did last night, Greyson is unsure. He's especially confused by the lack of dark circles or messy hair given the state of him at the late hour last night. Greyson blinks a few times and lets Cameron get the door for him, sliding past without a word. Not even a thank you . He doesn't deserve it. If anything: holding the door for him is the least Cameron could do right about now.

"Greyson-"

Greyson ignores the call from the man who might as well be a stranger. He goes down the steps and focuses on the phone call with his family. Wesley has gone oddly quiet since the speaker phone option was selected. Greyson almost wanted him to speak– even if it was nasty. He would rather have Wesley loudly hate him than silently ignore him.

"Greyson!" Cameron calls out again, jogging down the steps. "Wait up-"

"Honey, do you need to go?" Mum asks.

“No, no, you’re fine. I’m talking to you right now,” Greyson continues, keeping his eyes trained forward. “Ignore that.”

“No, well– darling I have stuff to do too. We’ve been talking for a while. You go spend some time with your friends, I’m just glad we got to chat today,” Mum insists. Greyson frowns.

“Mum- no, seriously, it’s fine. I can talk-”

“Have a very happy birthday, Greyson. I love you. Text me tonight.”

Without much more of a conversation, Mum hung up on him. Greyson grits his teeth, staring at the end call screen for the few seconds it was still up. He turns off his phone and pockets it as Cameron finally caught up.

“Greyson? I’m starting to think you’re-”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Greyson scoffs, looking up at him. “You have some balls to be standing here right now, Cunningham. I can’t even have a conversation with my own family without you ruining it-” Greyson turns and walks away, letting his stride carry him quicker. Cameron scowls, furrowing his eyebrows and following Greyson closely.

“Excuse me? The fuck is this about?”

“Mind your business, Cam, and I’ll happily mind mine.”

“Grey- I-I figured we had plans. Hell, Rowan said we might do something for your birthday if-”

“Well consider plans canceled,” Greyson shot back. Cameron is left in stunned silence. “Even if I wanted Rowan to do something for today, which I don’t , I most certainly wouldn’t want you involved in it. I don’t need you messing more shit up.”

“What did I do?” Cameron asks, face falling and a desperate look on his face. “Greyson- Grey! I don’t– did I– what happened? I don’t– I never– what ?”

The stammering is ridiculous. It’s nauseating. It’s so entirely mind boggling how someone could be so dense, so blind, to their own actions. Does he not realize he was caught? Does he not understand that honesty is key in any relationship– even those that aren’t truly a relationship? Does he not understand the gravity of Greyson’s

discomfort?

“Leave me alone, Cameron,” Greyson groans. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

“Will you just talk to me?!” Cameron demands, reaching out and grabbing Greyson’s wrist. Just as quickly, Greyson cranes out of it and takes a swift step back.

“ Don’t -” Greyson spits, “...touch me.”

There’s this harsh silence between them– one not even the traffic on the street could interrupt. The city has never been so quiet. Cameron has never felt so intimidated, so scared . His hands hover, as if wanting to reach again, and his mouth is parted, like the words are waiting to escape.

“Did Liam--?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Greyson groans. “Goodbye.”

Greyson walks away, and Cameron makes the best decision he could in that moment: he doesn’t follow.

He watches as Greyson marches off into the streets of Providence on this frigid November morning. It didn’t feel fair– Cameron doesn’t know why he’s in trouble, or who said what. He doesn’t know what happened to piss Greyson off so much, or what could possibly make him such a birthday-grinch. I mean– it’s his birthday! Isn’t that supposed to be a happy day? Isn’t today the best day to… I don’t know… celebrate?

Cameron runs a hand over the back of his neck, his mail in his other hand, barely in his grip. He feels like he’s merely a ghost, floating by.

He’s still not entirely sure what the past twelve-ish hours were like. Last night, he recalls starting a game of slap cup , but he doesn’t remember finishing it. He doesn’t remember much of *anything* , really. What he does know is that he woke up with the worst migraine he’s ever had, and he does know that he felt horrifically nauseous this morning, and he does know that he had a slight fever when he got up, which slowly faded away with lots of water. Cameron partially thought it was thanks to a killer hangover, but he’s never felt so awful before.

When he returns to the house, he finds his roommates still passed out

on the couch, the scent of alcohol, sweat, and vomit making the entire building reek. Cameron slowly inches inside, setting his mail aside and carefully cleaning up the mess that he knows no one else will bother to pick up.

He empties and stacks plastic cups before tossing them in a garbage bag. Same with beer cans and bottles– they get tossed into the giant recycling bin outside instead. He dumps any leftover food into a trash bag, too. He goes through four trash bags before all the garbage is cleaned up, and he is left with disgusting surfaces and a bad odor.

He's spraying down the counters and cleaning the bathroom, his mind stuck on Greyson. Greyson's eyes, red and bloodshot, like he didn't sleep. His voice, thick and heavy, like he was exhausted. His glare, like daggers. His anger, like murder. Cameron has been on the opposing side of Greyson's wrath before, but he never felt danger from it until today.

He is officially on Greyson's bad side. But not just because they are "enemies". No– Greyson is pissed .

"Morning," Sam greets with a yawn, shuffling into the bathroom. "You're like a good housewife. Cleaning up after everyone."

"If I don't do it, the house will smell like shit for two months, as proven by summer break" Cameron mumbles, not looking up.

"You sound like you have a hell of a hangover," Sam scoffs. Cameron rolls his eyes. "You alright, buddy?" Cameron just nods. "What's goin' on in there?"

"Nothing. It's fine," Cameron sighs, standing upright and walking out of the bathroom in an effort to sit in his own head, quietly and alone.

He manages to get most of the house clean before they all wake up– there was still some weird smell in the living room, but Cameron wasn't entirely convinced that it wasn't his roommates that smelled like that. When they started waking up and filtering through the bathroom, he tried to fix up the living room a little while it was empty– the couch was definitely not his favorite place. Why the fabric was wet after one of his roommates got up, he doesn't want to know.

He takes that as his sign to not touch it, and to give up.

He rifles through his mail again, frowning at the bills that came through. It is ridiculously expensive to be in Greek Life. Cameron

sighs, running a hand over his face, skimming the letter from the University for what he owes this time.

“Morning man,” Aiden claps him on the shoulder, his voice thick and groggy despite it being almost noon.

“Hey,” Cameron murmurs back, pulling out his phone to check his bank account. It’s only halfway through the semester, and he’s already wondering if he set aside enough during summer break for his bills.

“Last night was fucking awesome, dude,” Liam comes in behind him, laughing. “Never thought Cameron would be so good at drinking games. Thought you were all… too good for alcohol or whatever.”

“Not too good. Just not a fan,” Cameron says back without looking up.

He is relieved to find a larger number than anticipated stored away in his bank account. He forgot he took on a couple odd jobs at the start of the semester– a check just hit his account yesterday from a shift he took at a museum to help out with a wedding in August. He pulls up his school account to pay the bill, and is even more relieved to find that his scholarships and the GI bill from his father applied to the balance, cutting it down by nearly 90%.

Awesome.

“Oh that shit? I just send those to my parents,” Aiden scoffs, taking Cameron’s letter to read the balance. “They don’t even ask. They just log in and pay for it. Maybe just text your Dad a picture.”

“My parents don’t pay for my college,” Cameron murmurs under his breath.

“What do you mean? You spend your own money?” Liam scoffs.

“Well, I have scholarships,” Cameron explains tentatively. “My Dad’s military. I get money fro football and educational credit and I get some stuff biannually from some essays I submit-”

“Ew, bro, you give yourself more work ? I just tell my Mom that I won’t go if I have to pay,” Liam says. “Give it a shot. Save yourself a couple grand.”

“It… it doesn’t cost a couple grand,” Cameron mentions. Liam furrows his eyebrows. “If you make under a certain amount, Brown lowers the cost-”

“No one makes that little,” Liam says back. “Like, you’re a dependent for your parents, right? So there's no way-”

“I’m an independent,” Cameron reminds. “I pay for my own college expenses. I pay for my insurance and phone bill. I pay for my housing. My parents don’t claim me on their taxes. I- I get the discounted rate. It’s a thing Ivy League schools do for kids who-”

“Blah blah blah. This is boring. Don’t come crying to me when you’re broke. I’m just saying, send it to your Dad. Isn’t he, like, super rich? He can handle it.”

That’s not the point , Cameron wants to say. But he doesn’t.

He doesn’t send the bill to his father because, for once, he wants his talent to be his own. He wants his success to be his. He doesn’t want to owe it to his father to finish school. He doesn’t want to be like his frat brothers and rub it in everyone’s face that he had everything handed to him. He’s working for himself so he doesn’t become that person. He wants to be a hard worker. He wants to see his bank account suffer. He wants to pick up odd jobs when he has an available weekend so he learns to budget and get himself by.

He’s not a stuck up prick.

“So, Allie,” Aiden clears his throat, changing the subject. Cameron hits submit on the payment and pockets his phone.

“What about her?” Cameron furrows his eyebrows, looking up.

“I dunno. What about her ?” Liam waggles his eyebrows, leaning back against the counter. Cameron shifts his stance slightly.

“I… I feel like I’m missing something.”

Allie . Cameron barely even knows Allie. He knows shes the girl from Zeta Delta Xi. She’s… nice? He supposes? He hasn’t had many interactions with her. He’s talked to her a few times at some parties– mostly about the party, or whatever drinking game their friends dragged them into. Neither of them are all that much of drinkers or partiers, so how they both ended up in some of the craziest frats for parties, he’s not sure.

But that’s about it.

“Damn, you really did yourself in that bad?” Aiden scoffs. Cameron

slowly folds his arms over his chest. “Allie and you? Last night? Ring any bells?”

“...not really?”

His friends scoff out small laughs, shaking their heads, and leave it at that.

“Why? What about her?”

Cameron’s heart is hammering in his chest, and his nausea has returned. His migraine never left in the first place. He thinks back to Greyson this morning– his anger, his grief, his look of utter betrayal. Cameron feels like he knows exactly what happened, and yet, he’s terrified of knowing.

“Aiden.”

“None of my business,” Aiden says with a small chuckle. “Just sayin’... good for you.”

Good for you .

No, not good for him. Because Cameron has absolutely zero interest in Allie. He has zero interest in anyone, for that matter. The only one he has found even the slightest interest in was Greyson. Cameron knows they say “drunk words, sober thoughts” but it would take a lot more than a few drinks to make Cameron suddenly go from a sexuality crisis over an annoying British boy to sleeping with a girl he barely knows.

He didn’t like Allie. He still doesn’t.

He’s clearly not getting anything other than vague teasing from his friends, so he turns around and heads upstairs to his bedroom, where he hopes to God he finds nothing other than his typical room. Sam is sitting there, watching as Cameron slowly picks up after himself around the room– clothes in the laundry basket, stacking any old dishes, fixing his bed.

“You sure you’re alright?” Sam asks tentatively. “You haven’t… you haven’t been yourself.”

“Haven’t been myself,” Cameron repeats, glancing at him. “What does that mean?”

“I-I dunno,” Sam shrugs. “You’ve been… off. You’re not really the type to… to give into Aiden and Bryce and Liam’s every thought. Last night was weird. I’m honestly amazed you aren’t suffering from alcohol poisoning.”

Cameron slowly sank down onto the edge of his bed, looking at Sam intensely.

“I don’t remember-”

“And this whole-whole Greyson thing, I don’t know-”

“What Greyson thing?” Cameron asks, a little too quickly. Sam goes quiet.

“You don’t remember.”

“What am I supposed to remember?” Cameron presses. “First I hear about Allie, and now Greyson, and-”

“Dude, you slept with Allie and that-that Greyson guy was totally on a jealous tirade,” Sam frowns. Cameron really feels nauseous now. “Like-Like, I dunno. He saw you and her at some point, and apparently Aiden kept picking fights and it-it ended with him and his friends leaving, and everyone talking about how Greyson was trying to get with you. And I don’t know who to believe, because if the source is Aiden, it’s not very dependable, but you were gone for a while last night with Allie, and I saw Greyson watching you like a hawk, and Rowan seemed weird too-”

“I don’t-I didn’t sleep with Allie,” Cameron clarifies. Sam bites his cheek. “I have no interest in her whatsoever. Why is this- who said I-”

“Ask Allie. I don’t know, man,” Sam sighs. “Are you okay?”

Not really .

Cameron pulls out his phone and looks through his texts– lots of drunken texts to Greyson at the start of the night, a couple asking where he was, at midnight wishing him a happy birthday, and then nothing. He also had a few texts from Rowan, and most notably, Liam.

Liam: *You’re welcome ;)*

Cameron takes a deep breath, pulling up a new text. He types in

Allie's contact and drafts a text. He doesn't hit send, realizing just how crazy he sounds. He deletes it and tries again. Sam watches as Cameron shrinks back into his bed in the least comfortable position Sam has ever seen.

***Cameron** : weird question. and i'm sorry if it sounds creepy or gross.*

***Cameron:** did we sleep together last night?*

***Cameron:** i'm sorry*

Cameron's fingers lace through his hair, and he feels the migraine pressing on his eyes. He slides to his texts with Greyson again.

***Cameron** : I'm not exactly sure what I did yet, but I'm sorry. I will have a better apology when I know more.*

Greyson doesn't respond. Cameron didn't necessarily expect him to, to be fair.

He slides back to Allie's text, finding a typing bubble bounce in anticipation. Cameron prays to God she responds with a short " *lol no"* and it ends with that. He hopes she has an easy explanation that will make all this ease up in an instant.

The bubble disappears, and he thinks he could throw up.

A moment later, his phone vibrates, and her text is received.

***Allie:** Almost, but we stopped because you seemed out of it. Not to freak you out or anything, but I think someone mightve spiked your drink or something. I thought you were fine but after a few minutes I could just see something was off.*

***Allie:** you feeling okay this morning?*

Cameron sunk deeper into his position. He stares at the text for a long moment.

***Cameron:** i'm fine. I was just worried because I heard some weird things and i wanted to make sure you were ok*

He's not fine. Not at all.

***Allie** : Wanna go grab some coffee and chat?*

Cameron blinks a few times, trying to think of a way to say no. He

doesn't have other plans– Greyson isn't speaking to him right now– and he could really use some answers and clarity, but part of him is scared of what might come with it. What good does truth do when the damage has already been done?

Cameron clicks on his keyboard to write a response.

***Cameron** : Where ?*

Back at his dorm, Rowan is awake and showered clean, silently working on an assignment at his desk when Greyson walks in. He glances up at the sound of the door clicking open, offering a smile. Greyson doesn't return it.

"You good?" Rowan asks, immediately letting his joy falter.

"Dandy," Greyson sets his things down on his desk and pushes a hand through his hair. "I'm gonna go get food and hang out in the library."

"Oh, I'm hungry too. Can I tag along?"

"Depends. You gonna tell me what happened with Luca if you do?" Greyson raises an eyebrow. Rowan goes quiet. "That's what I thought. I'd rather you stay here."

"C'mon, man, that's not fair-" Rowan groans. "It's not even-"

"Did you pay any attention at all last night?" Greyson asks, exasperated. "Did you even notice them harassing me? Or see that Luca was missing for a good hour? Or how about the fact that we barely made it out the door without one of us getting jumped…" Rowan bites his cheek, sinking in his seat. He deflates upon Greyson's scolding, like a scared child being reprimanded by his father. "Your relationship with Luca, or lack thereof, is none of my business. But it is my business that you give a shit about your so-called friends. I refuse to lose the few good people I have in my life because you can't get your shit together-"

"As if I haven't spent months telling you the same damn thing about Cameron!" Rowan argues suddenly. "You and him villainize each other until it costs me my friendships, but the second something goes wrong with Luca I'm to blame? You're being a fucking hypocrite and you know it-"

"This isn't about Cameron-"

“Isn’t it always?” Rowan exclaims. “You won’t go to parties if he’s there. You wont go to study groups if he’s there. If I invite him over you’re gone. You and him cannot get your shit together long enough for me to be friends with the both of you-“

“I’m not having this conversation with you. Not today,” Greyson huffs, reaching into the box of gifts to gather the letters from his father, shouldering his backpack.

“Of course not. Because the second you might have an inkling of blame, you run-“

“For once, this isn’t my fault! Like, at all! I did nothing to Cameron, *he* ruined *me* . And you and Luca— whatever is going on, keep me out of it.”

“What the fuck do you mean ruined y-“

Greyson slams the dorm door shut behind him as he walks out.

One hell of a birthday he’s having.

He walks to the library and ends up in their cafe, ordering himself an Americano with an extra shot of espresso. He stands at the end of the counter to stir in his own cream and sugar, holding the stirring stick between his teeth as he picks up the coffee. He turns to exit and is met with the nuisance himself.

Cameron.

They make brief eye contact, and Greyson feels his rage flare. He’s starting to wonder if Cameron was stalking him.

Stood at his side is the beautiful blonde from last night, though. Allie. She’s even prettier in the daylight. Clear skin. Styled hair. Blue eyes. She holds herself like she’s perfect in every way. Maybe because she is. Only a truly perfect person can be as wild as they were last night and still look so put together, so beautiful, the next day.

Greyson averts his eyes and walks out to the chairs outside the cafe, sinking down into a comfortable armchair within eyesight of Cameron. He can’t stop glancing up at them— they’re talking to each other with hesitant smiles. Cameron buys for the both of them like a gentleman. She squeezes his arm and laughs at something he says as they wait. They sit together at a table outside the cafe, a mere 20 feet away from Greyson. Close enough to bear witness, far enough to be

deaf of their conversation.

He really should look away, but it feels like watching a lethal car accident. He can't. The damage is too grand.

"You sure you're feeling alright?" She asks Cameron quietly.

Cameron is wasting all his energy on not looking at Greyson. Even if he can feel his eyes burning holes. Even if he wants to run over and apologize. He swallows the lump in his throat and blinks a few times. He's so focused on not looking at Greyson, he doesn't have the brain capacity to lie.

"I don't know," Cameron scoffs, running a hand over his face. "I feel like… like everything is blurry."

Allie nods with a frown. She reaches out to rest her hand on his. Cameron glances up at her with a sad smile.

"Like you're in a haze…" Allie assumes. "Kinda like you might pass out, kinda like you might throw up?" Cameron nods. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Cameron shrugs, sitting back in his chair to take her hand off his. "I just… don't really know what to say. Or what to think. I mean— what are the odds of-"

"You're a college kid at a frat party. Your odds of getting drugged are at an all time high," Allie says matter-of-factly. Cameron frowns. "I'm just confused about who would even do that. Typically, they do it to- to get something out of you. But you finished that-that damn game and then we're hanging out and I could just see that something was wrong…"

After the game.

Cameron thinks back to the texts this morning. Liam's *you're welcome ;)*

"How could you tell?"

Allie scans his eyes for a long moment. He can't help but study hers, too. She seems so sweet. Cameron carries the guilt of what he could've done to her without intending to. He carries the guilt of leading her on when he really was barely in his own head.

"Well…" she sighs. "At first I couldn't. Y'know… drunk college kids

hook up all the time. I figured this was something ordinary. But at one point, you…" she bites her cheek. "You pulled back, and you looked at me, and you seemed so confused. Like you didn't know where you were." Cameron nods slowly. "Like you were expecting me to be someone else."

"I'm sorry-"

"Don't be," Allie shook her head quickly, frowning. "I-I just… I knew it wasn't right. You looked so lost in your own home, so… so I asked Sam where your room was, and we went upstairs to get you into some quiet place…" Cameron lowers his gaze to her hand on his arm, chewing on his cheek. "You calmed down a lot after that. I got you some water. I tried to talk to you, but you were so out of it… so… so I just let you sleep. And I left. I figured… it's better your friends thought you got some action then let them think something about you…"

"About me-" Cameron repeats.

"Like the fact that you were roofied at your own party?" Allie suggests. Cameron shakes his head. "I-I mean… I know nothing came of it. And I'm glad it was me instead of some girl who wouldn't have known to stop. I'm just… I'm worried about you. You're such a sweet guy, and…and I would hate to see you have a target on your back. I… I know how scary it is. I've been there."

"You have?"

Allie nods with a sad smile.

"Freshman year. First night party. I hadn't even rushed yet and was targetted by a group of guys who were running a Business Majors club," she exhales. "At first, I went along. Luckily, a friend found me and took me to a hospital. They overdosed me on some benzos and I spent two days in the hospital. The migraines, the nausea… it was awful. But nothing was worse than how scared I felt."

Greyson doesn't know what they're saying— he's too far away to hear, but he can tell its something mushy and sweet. He doesn't even hide it, either.

Greyson sips his coffee and skims the letter in his hand. He crunched awkwardly into the chair and yawns.

Greyson,

It's a funny story— the name Greyson. You may not find it funny, but I most certainly do.

When we had Wes, we didn't think much about names. Not as much as we should've. It's like your brother was born suddenly and we realized, we had no clue what to call this beautiful boy in our hands other than "son". It was near impossible to think of a name, until the sun started to set in the West, and we decided upon Wesley.

Now, Greyson, we meticulously planned your name. Your mother wanted something classic yet bold. I wanted an heir. Therefore, a boy after my own initials, and the name of a noble title, Greyson was born.

I write this incase I never have the chance to tell you in person. Time is limited, Greyson. For the old, the young, the strong and feeble, an end will come for us all. This is just one of those things that shouldn't go unsaid.

Love,

Dad.

Greyson closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. His headache only worsened. He swipes a hand over his cheek to mask the tear that threatened to spill. His palm caught it before his cheek could.

He carefully flattens out the paper and clips it into his binder, taking out the next one. He takes another sip of his coffee.

Greyson,

Did I ever get to tell you the story of the time I went to Vegas?

If not, here it is in writing:

It all started with this farmer-

Someone shoves their way through him and his chair as they walk past, and his coffee sloshes onto the table top. Swiftly, he grabs something to mop up the liquid from the paper, using his own sleeve in an attempt to preserve the writing. He has no thoughts in his head other than salvaging his father's parting words.

Greyson is okay with losing. He has lost a lot over the years. But this — he can't lose this. Not today. He wants just one more birthday with his Dad— is that so bad?

“Whoops,” someone snickers. Greyson glances up, and his shoulders fall.

The terrible trio.

“What? No sassy comeback this time? Did we finally wear you down?” Liam asks with a scoff. Greyson looks back down at the letters. They’re damaged, but salvageable. His jaw trembles. Carefully, he peels them from the vinyl table to put into a folder for safe keeping. “Are you fucking ignoring me?”

“Why do you insist on being terrible people?” Greyson finally snaps, louder than necessary, and his voice shaking. They chuckle to themselves. “This is pathetic, you know that? You act like high school bullies. I didn’t do anything to you. I’m just fucking sitting here-“

“Watch your mouth, Hampton-“ Liam says with a smirk.

“Or what? What could you possibly do to make my life any worse right now?” Greyson exasperates. The bystanders watch silently, uncomfortably. Greyson packs his belongings away and shakes his head. His anger and his hurt are building rapidly. He stands, taking the bag back over his shoulder and grabbing his coffee.

“C’mon, *Grey* , it’s just a little fun-“ Liam reaches and snags his shoulder. Between the letters, and his coffee, and last night, and the nickname, Greyson snapped.

Without missing a beat, Greyson whirls around with his coffee and splashes the remainder in the man’s face.

His smartest move? Unlikely. But it’s definitely his ballsiest one.

Liam is dripping with a piping hot Americano. Part of Greyson thinks ‘ *was this unwarranted?* ’ But then he recalls what it was like to be punched in the mouth just two months ago. Then he recalls the years of torment. Then he thinks about how long he’s wanted to fight back.

No. It was not unwarranted. Not at all.

“ *Are you fucking kidding me* ?”

Blind rage, the three all advance on Greyson, and he takes off in a sprint. He doesn’t get very far before Aiden tackles him— damn football players— and has him pinned. Greyson thrashes and shouts, blocking his face as Aiden lays it on him. Punch after punch, until

Bryce and Liam can catch up to and start kicking and contributing to the fight.

Bystanders yelp and cry out for help. Anyone nearby staggers a few steps back to stay out of the way. Greyson scrambles on the floor in an effort to free himself, but it doesn't do much. He tries to manage a couple hits, but its drowned out by their impact.

"The fuck was that for? Huh? The fuck you do that for?!"

Liam is spitting his words, the saliva flying as he spoke. Greyson writhes and wriggles out from his grasp. Library employees are scrambling from their desks to come help. Some of the library attendees were rushing forward in an effort to pry the men off of Greyson— one of them being Luca. When Luca showed up, Greyson is uncertain. Shortly on his heels is Cameron.

Of course Cameron has to get involved.

"Aiden, Aiden! Hey!" Cameron lunges in, yanking Aiden by the shoulder. "Dude, get off of him! Quit! Stop it!"

With enough force (and the director of library services marching over) Aiden is yanked off of Greyson, and Cameron stands between the three and the boy on the floor. Luca knelt on the floor with Greyson, shielding him from view.

"You okay?" Luca pants out, cringing at Greyson's appearance. "Hey, it's alright-"

"He fucking threw his coffee in my face-"

"He punched me in the fucking mouth!" Greyson shouts back through bloody lips.

"Yeah, like, two months ago!"

"You've harassed me ever since! I can't fucking exist on this campus without you over my shoulder threatening to hurt me!" Greyson exclaims, still on the floor.

"Will you stop shouting in my library!" A woman says over them both. The group goes quiet. "I don't give a damn who started what. I want all of your student IDs. I will be getting in contact with your deans, and they can handle it from there. Until then, I don't want a single one of you in my library, you hear?"

Greyson is still catching his breath, his arm around his ribcage and his nose gushing blood. Greyson uses his sleeve to get some of it off his face.

They all volunteer their names and student ID numbers to be marked in her system. Aiden, Bryce and Liam are escorted out by security, meanwhile the librarian grabs some tissues to slow the bleeding.

“Alright hon, are you able to stand?” She sighs, glancing at Luca and Cameron, who were still there, waiting for direction. “Are you boys walking him home?”

“Yeah.”

“No,” Greyson grumbles.

“I am,” Cameron intervenes. There's a beat of silence. “You want a hand up?”

Greyson glares at him, then looks to Luca for assistance. Luca takes his arm and helps pull him off the floor. Greyson sways and staggers slightly, the two both catching him before he could fall again. He blinked back tears and pulled the tissue from his face, attempting to scrunch his nose and being met with pain. Cameron grabs his backpack off the floor.

“Hon, you need to reach out to your dean immediately. Preferably before I do,” the librarian murmurs to Greyson, eyeing his companions. “Go home. Clean up. Maybe contact campus police too.”

Greyson nods, his face burning with a mixture of embarrassment and hatred. Luca swipes a hand over his back, murmuring a soft ‘ lets get you home’.

Cameron follows them out.

“Just abandoning your date like that?” Greyson asks in a grumble, his voice rasped and barely audible. Luca keeps his hand hovering behind Greyson, just incase. Greyson isn’t a fall risk, but apparently Luca isn’t taking the risk.

“It wasn’t a date. Mind your business,” Cameron says back coldly. “I’m just making sure you get to the dorm without getting jumped again.”

“Luca is here. It would be pretty fucking stupid if they went after me literal minutes after-“

“You think Luca is a deterrent?” Cameron scoffs. “No offense, Luca, but you’re just as much of a target as Greyson is. It’s like a fuckin’ two-for-one deal if they see you.” Greyson rolls his eyes.

Cameron gets the door for them both. Just as they’re exiting the building, the trio is sat outside on a bench, muttering amongst themselves. Their attention lifts at the sound of the door. Greyson keeps his head low. Luca moves closer to him. Cameron pretends not to see them.

“Cameron!” Bryce shouts out. “The fuck, man? You comin’ home with us or not?”

“Not!” He calls back over his shoulder.

It’s not a very long walk, but it doesn’t help that Greyson had a slight limp as they strolled. By the time they got to the dormroom, Greyson was still profusely bleeding from his nose and was getting dizzy. Luca gets Greyson’s key to scan it at the door and lets them in. Cameron grabs the nearest chair and pulls it out to catch Greyson’s exhausted body. Greyson plops down without hesitation, not even bothering with his shoes policy. Cameron and Luca still stop to kick them off, though.

“Jesus Christ-“ Rowan shot up from his spot, lunging to his feet. “What the fuck happened? Did you pick a fight with a bear?”

“I have tissues on…” Greyson mindlessly waves in the direction of his nightstand. Cameron walks around him to go grab the box, handing it over. “And a trash can-“

“I got it,” Luca rushes, grabbing the can from next to the door. Greyson lets the soaked tissues drop into the can and replaces them with new ones, pinching the bridge. He spits pure blood into the trash, too. Cameron grimaces, crouching beside the chair and pulling more tissues to catch the mess.

“Picked a fight with three bears, to be precise,” Cameron mutters, scanning his surroundings. It’s Greyson. There’s no way he doesnt have some kind of first aid kit in here. “Aiden, Liam and Bryce. Greyson swung and they swung back-“

“I didn’t swing -“ Greyson defends. “I spilled my coffee-“

“On Liam’s face, dumbass,” Cameron spits. “The fuck was that about? I look over and you’re bickering and next thing I know Liam is

wearing your eight dollar coffee and you're soaked in blood-"

"It's not my fucking fault-"

"How the fuck is it not your fault?!" Cameron exclaims. "You flung your hot coffee on him! Did you think he would just let it slide?!"

"You have no fucking clue what you're talking about-" Greyson says before spitting another wad of blood. Cameron grimaces. Rowan finally comes to his senses and pulls out Greyson's first aid kit from his nightstand, joining them in the effort to fix up their dumbass friend.

"You are acting like a fucking idiot today," Rowan says. "I'm with Cameron on this one. What the fuck makes you think you can just skate by without consequences when you have a record of-"

"Of course you take Cameron's side," Greyson says incredulously. "It's always his side. It's always what he's doing right and what makes him so fucking special. If you paid even an inkling of attention, you'd understand that I have been through Hell." Cameron bites his cheek, frowning. "I am having a terrible day. The one solace I had in this fucking awful day has been this stupid gift from my Dad. He's been dead for almost seven years and I finally had something of him and they ruined it. They go out of their way to take everything I give a shit about and ruin it. I have a bad fuckin attitude? Guess what. You would too if everyone in your life hated you." Greyson coughs and spat another wad of blood. "I-I came all this fucking way to start new. I'm across the fucking world from my home trying to be someone better and fucking everyone hates me here, too."

He has tears on his face, and the words spilled out quicker than he's ever spoken before, and he feels like he's going to vomit. There is a break of silence, and Greyson's jaw trembles. He puts his head in his hands and sniffles, letting more tears fall. Luca runs a hand over his shoulders.

"I'm sorry…" Rowan whispers.

"No, you're not," Greyson rasps. "You feel bad, because it sounds bad. But you're not sorry. So… don't say it."

Luca rests a hand on his arm. Greyson's hand mindlessly falls on top of it and squeezes. He leans into Luca for warmth, for something resembling comfort. Luca feels like the only one in this room who was on his side.

“What can I do to help?” Luca asks in a whisper.

“I-I really just want to go home at this point,” Greyson exhales, switching out tissues again. “I’m so fucking tired of fighting my way to survive on this fucking campus.”

There’s an all-encompassing silence that passes over them. Perhaps its Greyson’s potential concussion, or maybe it’s that his migraine had his ears ringing too loud to hear anything, or maybe, for once in their fucking lives, no one was arguing with him. Rowan dug through Greyson’s first aid supplies and pulls out a cold-pack, shaking it up to get it cold. Greyson accepts the offering, resting it against the various painful places on his face. It drifts from his nose, to his eyes, to his temples.

“Alright,” Cameron mumbles, standing up. “Call me if you need me. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Where are you-” Greyson began, looking over as Cameron pats him on the shoulder. “Cameron-”

Cameron marches out with a stone cold, emotionless look on his face that can only portray hatred. Greyson looks up at Rowan with a furrow to his brow, then down at the floor again.

One hell of a birthday .

Chapter End Notes

So... This one was.... intense.

I was working on this and Read Between the Lines this week in hopes of getting them both out ASAP-- RBTL chapter is coming soonish btw-- but then my niece ended up in the ER tuesday night and has been in the ICU ever since, so... stressful couple days. RSV is no joke friends. Please make sure you're taking care of yourselves and your loved ones.

Happy Friday. Tomorrow is my day off, so I will hopefully be able to work on, and maybe finish, the RBTL chapter.

Until next time!
Hayl (@ hayloftown on twt)

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Picking fights.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cameron hasn't picked a fight since he was in high school.

To be fair, the kid back then had it coming. No one gets to hit his sister. The only one who gets to bully Cameron's sisters is *Cameron* .

The last time he picked a fight, he knew he wouldn't lose. His Dad was military, meaning Dad taught him everything he knew on hand-to-hand combat, and was a drill sergeant about standing up for whats right. The kid was only a few months younger than Cameron and about the same height, but Cameron had the rage of an older brother who was kept up all night by his crying little sister. Of course he felt bad, but even more so, he was fucking exhausted from not sleeping, and he had a massive exam coming up he needed to study for, and he can't focus with Callan's crying.

He walked up to the douchebag before their shared biology class. He saw Cameron coming. He started to shrink back into the crowd, but it didn't do much. His classmates parted like the red sea. Cameron didn't say a damn word, he just swung. Full force.

He broke two fingers and dislocated his thumb in the process. He also broke the guy's nose, but in all honesty, that's the least he deserved, given the bruise Callan came home with. Cameron can still remember the way she cowered on the couch from their attention, or worse, the way she sobbed when Dad found out. Cameron still thinks about the way she refused to go to school for the remainder of the week, scared of what might happen to her.

The second punch wasn't quite as hard. He swung, and it knocked the guy on his ass, and Cameron's hand hurt, but nothing broke that time. The guy who hit his sister dropped to the floor, and Cameron kept hitting until a teacher ran over to pull him off by the collar.

Dad was so mad when they drove to the hospital for his hand. Cameron sat in the passenger's seat silently, glaring at the road ahead

of him. Dad scolded him the entire way there about his suspension and about the proper form when throwing a punch, but worst of all: Dad was mad that he had to go and break some of his own bones in the process.

“If you really give a shit about football, you wouldn’t put yourself in positions where you won’t be able to play for a while. And your damn piano lessons– what the hell, man?” Dad groaned, tracing a hand over his forehead. “Your mother is going to be furious.”

Dad was right. Mom was furious. They sat in the hospital for five hours, going through X-rays, having his thumb relocated, and splinting his broken fingers. Mom spent another two hours yelling when they got home. Cameron was trapped at the kitchen table with both of his parents yelling about self control and *what about college* ? His oldest sister, Clarke, stood in the doorway to the kitchen with a small smile. Cameron smiled back. Callan was upstairs, hiding from the aftermath.

It’s not that he hasn’t wanted to pick a fight since then. God, he would love to. People get on his nerves easily, and he’s known for having a temper, but he has developed a sense of that “self control” Mom shouted about. He doesn’t run in swinging everytime someone pisses him off, and he often doesn’t fight back when he should, too. No matter how deserving.

All that went out the window after today, though. Greyson’s tears, his pain, was unjustified. Cameron’s heart was racing, his hands shaking, from the idea of someone in his own house, someone supposed to be his “brother”, spiking his drink. He has a guess as to who. The same person who sent him a taunting text. The same person who also has a habit of running into a situation swinging.

When Cameron walks into the frat house from the pouring rain, Liam, Aiden, and Bryce are all standing around the kitchen grumbling about Greyson. Liam has since changed out of his coffee-soaked clothing, though he still smells of the Americano, so Cameron assumes he has yet to shower it off completely. Aiden leans back against the counter, arms folded over his chest. Liam is pacing, glowering, fussing about his rage. Bryce stands between the two of them, equally as annoyed, but quiet.

They all lift their gaze at the sound of the door closing.

“What the *fuck* , man?” Aiden hisses. “You suddenly sucking his dick

or something? You're supposed to be on our side-"

"Shut the fuck up, Aiden." Cameron snaps, walking straight past Aiden and grabbing Liam by the collar of his shirt, slamming him against the wall. The action is met with gasps and started shouts, and Liam's eyes double in size. "Tell me what you put in my drink last night."

"I-I didn't do anything, I-I don't know wh-what you're-" Liam stammers. Cameron yanks on his collar again, then pushes him back into the drywall with a resounding *thunk* .Drywall crumbles around him. Liam groans as his head bounces off the paint, wincing away. "Okay! Okay! I'm sorry! I was-I-I was just trying to help you loosen up! You're always so tense and you never seem to have fun at the fucking parties so I-I thought-"

"What did you give me?!" Cameron spits in his face again.

"Cameron, Cameron- hey," Bryce interrupts. "Buddy, take a breather-"

"I-I don't know!" Liam winces. "I don't know! It was-It was just something leftover! I don't know!"

"You're fucking ridiculous," Cameron barks back, releasing his collar. "Do you have any idea how fucking stupid that is? God forbid it's something I can get kicked off the team for, or-or something I might've had an allergy to, or-or, I don't know, maybe did you think about the fact that I was literally *drugged* at a *college party* , one of the most dangerous things you can possibly do? Did you think for a God-Damn minute about what could have happened?!"

"I- of course I did! And it worked! You loosened the hell up! You had fun! For once you were someone we could actually enjoy the presence of," Liam argues. "You know how annoying it is seeing you drift around like a fucking freak at all our events? It's about fucking time you got some action-"

That blind rage returns. The same one that hunted down his sister's ex-boyfriend in the high school hallways. The same one that sat idly as his parents yelled in his face, because he knew he was in the right.

The one who swings without second thought.

Liam hits the ground on the first swing. There's this grotesque crack to his nose, followed by spurting blood and a loud yelp of pain. Bryce and Aiden both jump upright in an effort to get in the middle of them. Cameron drops to the floor with Liam and punches him a second time.

Then a third. Fourth. Fifth. Aiden is yanking on his shirt, and Bryce is shouting for him to stop, and some of their roommates are scrambling into the kitchen to see what was going on. Liam cowers behind his hands as Cameron swung, again and again and again, until Liam's face is purple and blood soaked, until he looks more like Greyson did.

"Cameron!" Sam finally runs in, helping Aiden pry him off. They each grab one of his arms and haul him off of Liam's nearly unconscious body.

"Get the fuck off of me!" Cameron shouts, thrashing. "Get off! He fucking deserves it! I want him gone! He deserves it-"

"Cameron, chill. Chill!" Sam barks, him and Aiden struggling to push him away from Liam, who was being mopped up by their roommates. They push Cameron outside onto the back porch and finally let him go, Aiden blocking the door inside, and Cameron shaking off his burning hands. The rainfall echoes against the awning that covers them, thunder making the ground tremble. "The fuck, man?"

"He drugged me, Sam!" Cameron yells back. Sam recoils. Cameron's face is pink, and his eyes water. "He spiked my fucking drink! He set me up last night! Do you have any fucking clue how terrifying it was to wake up this morning and not know a damn thing?!"

"I get it," Sam says in a calmer tone, holding a shaking hand out. "I can imagine it was scary. But you need to calm down. Take a breath." Cameron nods, running a hand through his damp hair and pacing, taking a breath. His chest rises and falls rapidly, and his eyes burn with panicked tears that he refuses to let fall. "Did you talk to Allie?" Cameron nods, swallowing the lump in his throat. "What did she say?"

"She-She knew," Cameron sniffles, looking up at Sam, who seems to be the only voice of reason right now. "I-I mean… I mean, she could tell something was wrong. She was the one who helped me figure it out." Cameron looks at Aiden, jaw trembling. Aiden's face softens slightly. "I want him gone."

"I know," Sam says calmly.

"I'm not talking to you," Cameron mutters, harsher than intended. Sam bites his cheek. "Aiden. It's him or me. I want him gone."

"That's not my call," Aiden says. "I get it, but I don't make that choice-"

“Then be useful for once in your life and fucking help me,” Cameron spits, marching up to Aiden, getting in his face. “Do something for someone other than yourself. Stop being a selfish prick and try thinking about someone else for the first time in your useless fucking life.” Aiden scowls.

“Cameron. I suggest you take that back,” Aiden threatens.

“Or what? You gonna attack me, too?” Cameron tempts. “Unlike Greyson, I can hold my own. I can hit back.” Aiden rolls his eyes. “You think I can’t take you?”

“I know you can’t,” Aiden tempts. “You can barely handle a football game without whimpering to the coach. I doubt you could land a hit on me.”

“And yet between the two of us, who has the highest success rate?” Cameron tempts. Aiden glares at him. “Watch yourself, Aiden. I’m not fucking playing around anymore.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise.”

When Greyson stops bleeding as much, he steps out to take a shower.

The necklace Phoebe made him still sat on his chest, the string stained red, but otherwise intact. He carefully set it aside with his clothes for safe keeping.

The water runs red and swirls down the drain. His skin is purple and black, tattooed with pain, and soft with bruises. Greyson flinches at the most painful grazes over his ribs, and God he has a migraine. He soaks under the hot water in hopes of release in the tension in his head and muscles, but it doesn’t do much.

When he returns to his dorm, Luca is still there. Luca and Rowan both sit silently in the room on opposite sides, ignoring one another. They both sit upright and smile when Greyson returns though.

“You look better,” Luca mentions. Greyson nods, running a hand over his face.

“I feel a little better, too,” Greyson exhales, grabbing his backpack and opening it.

He pulls out the letters and carefully lays the coffee-soaked ones on the heater and points their oscillating fan at them, weighing them down with a potted plant and a picture frame. He chucks his clothes in the laundry basket, being sure to grab Phoebe's necklace first, pulling it back over his head. He fiddles with the beads on it while he carefully lays out each individual paper. Some of them were starting to tear, which he quickly tries to amend by laying flat for drying. He will tape them back to perfection later. Luca and Rowan watch this process closely.

"Can I help?" Rowan asks quietly. Greyson glances over his shoulder and nods once.

Rowan is gentle with the papers, careful not to pull on any of the fragile pieces. The two of them work in unison until they're all splayed out to dry. Luca watches on apologetically, until Greyson finally sits and sinks into his bed for some comfort.

"What can I do to make this better?" Luca asks quietly. Greyson gnaws on his cheek and takes a breath, grimacing.

"Can you go ask the RA for some ice?" He requests. Luca nods.

"Yeah, yeah. Of course," Luca jumps upright. "I'll be right back. Give me like five minutes."

Greyson tries to get comfortable where he sat. His back props against some pillows, and his eyes train on the window. It started raining shortly after Cameron left, and the sound was mesmerizing as it hammered against the window, wind howling as it passed. Greyson watches the droplets race down the glass and thinks of home. Rainy ol' England. The power crackles in and out with the next strike of lightning.

His face burns from such a powerful punch. His old cold pack is barely helping with his jaw pain, and he has a blinding headache, pinching behind his eyes. His tears and the injuries don't help with the eye pain, either.

"The reason I didn't tell you about the Luca stuff was because I didn't know what to say," Rowan admits in a murmur. Greyson lifts his gaze and frowns. "I-I don't know. I don't know what I was thinking, or what I was feeling. I stopped because… I don't know. I guess I didn't want it to be real. I didn't want it to be a thing. I saw how people treated you, and-and I have my own stuff to work through. I… I guess I'm just as bad as they are." Rowan runs a hand over his face,

exhaling.

“Shut up dude,” Greyson groans. Rowan furrows his eyebrows. “Look at me in my gay, black and blue face and tell me that you are just as bad as my bullies because you’re having a sexuality crisis. Go on and tell me that your mixed feelings put you on the same level as violent homophobes.”

“But-“

“Your internalized bullshit is nothing like their ignorance, Rowan,” Greyson blinks a few times. “They deserve to get their ass kicked and expelled from the school. You deserve a fucking therapist.” Rowan rolls his eyes. “So you like Luca? So what? What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is I don’t want to end up black and blue, too scared to get my own ice packs because I’ll get my ass kicked if I step outside my dorm,” Rowan snaps. “I-I don’t- I don’t have that option, Greyson. It’s just… I’m already outside the realm of-of the guys. The last thing I want is to be treated like-“

“Like me,” Greyson states. Rowan frowns, and eventually, he nods. “Y’know… I’m not saying you have to come out. I’m not saying you need to know your sexuality even, or that you have to be-be in a relationship with Luca,” Greyson grimaces as he pushes himself upright, scanning his best friend. “But you do need to be a good person. And you owe Luca an explanation, because… because he’s heartbroken. Even if he doesn’t understand, he deserves the truth.” Rowan nods. “If you having a crush on a dude makes you scared of your friends… maybe you’re friends with the wrong people.”

Rowan looks out the window and lets himself think about it. Right on cue, Luca marches back in, dumping three ice packs on Greyson’s bed. Greyson lays down, resting one on his face, the other on his ribs, and a third on his hand, and closes his eyes.

“What did I miss?” Luca asks, hopping up on Greyson’s bed to sit with him. Greyson lets his legs fall across Luca’s lap. “You okay?”

“Miserable,” Greyson responds. “Thank you for asking. Now let me take a nap.”

Cameron has to leave the house that night. It’s just not safe anymore. It’s not his mask it used to be.

Liam will be raging over his injuries most likely– he ended up in urgent care– and Bryce gave him a gentle but honest warning to stay the fuck away when he gets back. For his own safety.

He gets live updates from Sam about what's happening. Everything people were saying, what they think should happen as a repercussion, anyone talking shit, and more. Cameron stays in the library's 24-hour room to lay low, the library director eyeing him curiously as he enters. She clearly remembered him from earlier in the day.

Cameron plops his stuff down at a plush armchair in the corner of the room, cracks open his laptop and a textbook to look busy, and looks at his texts again.

***Rowan** : Greyson is looking pretty rough, but he seems to be in better spirits. Not sure if you care, but… thought you should know. He's okay.*

Cameron feels his heart tug, and he runs a hand over his face. Why does it bother him so much what Greyson thinks? Why does it matter so deeply, so intensely, whether he's okay?

He just responds with a ' *thanks for the update* ' .

He tries his best to get some homework done, to be productive. He skims over the passages of his assigned reading, but he doesn't retain a damn word of it. The only thing he remembers is the weird diagram of a frog, and wondering what the hell it had to do with computer science. When he gets bored of that, he opens up his online classroom tabs, clicking through missing assignments. His mind has been too busy to actually do anything today. He didn't go to a single class. He didn't finish his essays, or submit his quiz, and he definitely didn't do the discussion posts…

There's a buzz from his phone.

Sam.

***Sam:** Liam's home .*

Cameron's heart drops, and he lifts his gaze to look around, just to ensure he wasn't being stalked. He is tempted to ask about the damage. He's tempted to ask anything. His thumbs hover over the keyboard. Curiosity stirs in his gut.

Sam texts him the answers to his questions before he can ask them.

***Sam** : Broken nose, broken tooth, broken collar bone, concussion, and double black eyes. If he wasn't falling apart, he would be making our lives a living hell. I think you might've also bruised his ego, though, because he just sorta sulked into the house and went to bed.*

Cameron can't help but feel a spike of pride.

"Excuse me," a woman calls out. Cameron lifts his gaze to find the source, meeting the attention of the library director. "You were one of the boys involved in the fight earlier, weren't you?"

Fuck.

"Well, ma'am-" Cameron started, grimacing slightly.

"No, no– honey, you're not in any trouble. I know you weren't- you weren't one of those boys on him. I just… I wanted to pop over, check in. Is your friend okay?" She looks at him so gently, so warmly.

She reminds Cameron of the woman who ran his favorite breakfast place in Kissimmee. Her name is Josefa, and she is a sweet little old lady who speaks broken English and has a beautiful singing voice. She gave Cameron his first job as a teenager, where he bussed for her in any of his available hours, and at night would go through and tidy up the diner, mopping floors, taking out the trash, and other maintenance tasks she was a little too arthritic and tired for. Josefa's daughter was a girl Clarke was really good friends with, Salome, and Cameron had a little bit of a crush on in middle school. Their diner also made the best grits.

"Greyson?" Cameron asks quietly, and the woman nods. "Yeah… yeah, he's okay. He's recovering. Banged up and tense, but… but he'll be okay."

"Well, you let him know I'm thinkin' of him," she insists. "Jihan Cabrerra. Give him my name, let him know I will back him up at any hearings with the deans office."

"Will do," Cameron nods, offering a small smile. "Thank you."

When she walks away, he looks back down at his bruised up hand and frowns. He traces over the busted knuckles and glances back up at the library director, who returned to work.

Cameron looks back at his phone. Turns out he's impulsive today.

He clicks on Greyson's contact.

***Cameron** : we'll talk about all this tomorrow .*

He hits send before he can stop himself.

He knows he's in for a long night tonight. He pulls his hoodie out of his backpack and uses it as a pillow, sinking deeper into the chair.

The hours pass slowly, and the seconds go slower. He watches the clock most of the night, racing it to the undisclosed finish line. He yearns for freedom, but wonders what it will look like– what waits for him on the other side of the library doors. Greyson, and Aiden, and Liam and Bryce. His deans, and his fraternity, and his football team alike.

He wrote up a few emails that he never sent, explaining himself, explaining his hardships. He was too weak to send them. He was too scared to admit it all.

He goes to his 9:00AM class, finding an uneventful lecture about the same things they learned about last class. Cameron puts his head down on the desk, half awake, letting the mass of other attendees carry the weight of audience participation. He didn't get much sleep in the library last night. The sound of his professor's voice was just soothing enough to earn him a short nap.

He shoulders his backpack and walks out, rubbing his eyes and shuffling in an unknown direction. Usually around now, he would be texting Greyson about his plans for the next few hours. Usually, around now, he would be figuring out when would be the best time to walk toward Greyson's dorm, and he would have those butterflies in his gut that get all rambunctious and excited about the idea of seeing him. Disgustingly nauseating and beautifully unionized– those butterflies might have something figured out that Cameron doesn't.

He pulls up his text messages with Clarke, who had been nonstop harassing him the past two days about his lack of texts. He's not entirely sure what he could tell her that didn't make her worry, and dammit, he knows better than to tell her a lie. Clarke can always see through them, like she had special mind reading capabilities for just him.

How does he tell his sister the trouble he might be in, the problems he's facing, without facing a blind panic from her, and thus, her tattling to Mom and Dad?

His feet kick through piles of leaves on the sidewalk as he shuffles down the road to an unknown location. Back to the library? Brave it at the house? Maybe even go to the gym? He's not sure. Every option feels like a bad one.

He stuffs his phone in his pocket and looks back up, eyes tracing the sky. It's still rainy from last night. The cars are splashing water as they drive by. The leaves are wet and sticking to his shoes. His coat doesn't feel like nearly enough to keep him warm. He exhales, and he can see his breath steam out.

He makes eye contact with a pedestrian walking toward him.

Not a pedestrian– a friend. Aiden.

"Hey," Cameron exhales as Aiden walks straight in his direction. "How's everything back at the-"

He recoils at the harsh impact of his back against a brick wall and a fist to the mouth.

"Jesus Christ-" Cameron groans, swiping a thumb under his lip and grimacing. "Are you fucking serious, dude?"

"Do you have any idea what shit you started?!" Aiden spat, going to swing again. Cameron narrowly dodges, putting a hand out to keep his distance. "You have any fucking clue what kinda shit we're in now?!"

"I didn't start anything, dumbass!" Cameron shouts back, shoving Aiden backwards as he attempts to get in Cameron's face. "I didn't do shit. I got drugged, and you guys got what's coming to you."

"Yeah, well now they're fuckin' kickin half the team for involvement with Greyson, and don't get me started on what they're gonna do to Liam-"

"Liam can eat shit," Cameron argues. "I don't give a damn who's getting what. Whatever punishment you get is on your own account."

Aiden's nostrils flare, and his face is burning red. His shoulders heave with every angry breath. Cameron can see his mental state dwindling, and his fists clenching.

"You swing at me again and I'll kick your ass," Cameron threatens. "I'm not dealing with this bullshit anymore. I'm not doing it. I'd

sooner get arrested for assault than I would take it from you ever again."

"You're making a bad enemy, Cam."

"You think I can't take care of myself?" he raises an eyebrow, stepping closer. "Go on. Swing. See what fucking happens."

He can see Aiden thinking about it. He can see the temptation. He can see the steroid induced rage and the crumbling of his composure. Cameron assumes he will be taking impact at any second, but it will be the last time. No one will be putting their fucking hands on him again.

"Watch your back," Aiden finally declares, and stalks away.

Cameron clenches his jaw and exhales, looking down at the puddles at his feet. He thumbs at the corner of his mouth again and it pulls back red. He spits at the ground and swipes the back of his palm across his mouth and walks away, to the one place he can always call home.

Greyson has been wandering the music hall aimlessly for an hour now.

He's not sure what brought him here– he's never been much of a musical person. His parents thought wind instruments were crawling with diseases, band kids were always sick, and friends were a surefire way to bring home the flu, and thus, Greyson never touched an instrument. He never had the chance.

Though, that didn't mean he didn't like music. No– he loved it, in fact. He loves percussion, and the way it matches the sound of tennis balls volleying across the net, and he loves wind instruments and the way they sound like rainy days, and he loves piano, and the peace that comes with melodies. As a kid, he liked to sit outside the bandroom just to listen to the instruments, mentally identifying them by sound alone. He could tell the difference between an oboe and a flute, or the different types of drums, and he mentally recalled the different notes on a piano, but his brother thought it was weird when he found out.

Greyson had wandered for a while. On one end of the music hall is the theater department, doing rehearsals for their musical at the end of December. In the upstairs, there are violin lessons going on. Outside, the band is practicing in the field.

But in the auditorium, the one room that is usually empty around now, that is otherwise usually abandoned for anything other than rentals for recitals, is a singing song of piano keys.

Though, Greyson doesn't recognize it, which is odd. Because Greyson recognizes everything. He remembers everything. And yet, he's never heard this one before.

He stands outside the doors, listening to the faint echo of the piano from afar, wondering what show was going on inside. He hadn't heard of any piano recitals, and he hadn't seen anything on the auditorium schedule related to booking practices. If he had, he would be here far more often.

Slowly, he cracks the door open and shuffles in. It's like his headache melts away at the sound of music. It's so dim, he can't see the composer– just the shadowy figure of a man at the piano, not noticing Greyson's presence. He inches forward, planning to sink into one of the chairs, to hide here and just silently listen. The closer he got, the more he recognized.

The curls at the base of his skull. The slight glint of blond in the barely-there light. Strong jawline, slightly softened by scruff. Greyson bites his cheek and moves closer still. Broad shoulders, strong but thin arms, nimble fingers. Closer again. The slight curve to his back, and the steadiness of his breaths, like they were trained.

Greyson folds his arms over his chest and watches the song come to a screeching halt. Cameron's fingers go still, and his feet too. There is a moment of resounding sound before silence. Nothing but their shared breaths. Cameron sits up straighter, tipping up his chin. Greyson can tell he was waiting. Greyson could tell Cameron knew he was there.

He ascends the stairs to the stage, and Cameron moves over on the bench to make space for two. Greyson considers staying where he is– he doesn't know who's sat there, and the last time the piano was cleaned, and he doesn't know if Cameron showered recently, or if his hands were sanitized, and he doesn't know if this air he's breathing in is pure enough-

He sits. He's just magnetic.

Cameron doesn't look at him. He's scared to. They sit there for a long few moments, and Greyson studies the keys for a split second. He taps one, cringes, and then tries again.

Like he knew the song his whole life, like it wasn't some melody Cameron invented on the spot only twenty minutes prior, Greyson plays back the tune, slowly but surely, without missing a single note. He's not perfect. He doesn't know what he's doing entirely. But he remembers it.

Cameron's eyebrows furrow, and he watches back for a few seconds before he slowly rests his hands back on the keys and plays back the same tune in a lower scale. They play in harmony, and the song only gets that much more beautiful.

Cameron finally looks at Greyson, and finds him intensely focused on the piano, eyebrows furrowed, lips curled, and his teeth tight on his cheek, watching his own hands recall a song he's only ever heard once.

When they finish, Cameron is breathless, and Greyson smiles.

"...how did you do that?" Cameron whispers, as if the walls were listening. Greyson shrugs, and smiles wider.

"Good memory."

He says it like it's easy, like it's nothing. Cameron has never seen something so incredible, though.

"So you just… hear it once and know it by heart?"

"For the most part," Greyson nods. "Eidetic memory." Cameron felt those butterflies rage all over again. Finally, Greyson has adjusted to the dark lighting and gets a better look at Cameron. His smile falls, and they return to reality.

"So I figured out why you're mad at me," Cameron finally says, looking away. He traces the keys, but doesn't push any of them. Greyson doesn't like the way he avoids eye contact. He doesn't like the way he looks so… guilty. He adjusts how he sat, bracing himself for impact. "The-The Allie thing. You-You saw something that-that made you uncomfortable, and-"

"You're allowed to see whoever you want to see, Cameron," Greyson groans, already tired of this. "It-It isn't any of my business. Just- I-I don't want to be a part of it. I'm already taking a risk with everything else, and I don't want to be someone's sloppy seconds, and I know we never said this was a-"

“Will you please shut up and let me finish?” Cameron snaps. Greyson frowns, shrinking. Cameron traces a hand over his face. “I-I haven’t been hooking up with anyone. Only you. It’s only been you. I only want it to be you -”

“But Allie-”

“What happened with Allie wasn’t something I wanted to happen,” Cameron says back. Greyson’s stomach twists. “She-She could tell. She stopped it in its tracks when she noticed something was wrong. That’s why she and I went out together yesterday, so she could fill me in on the gaps and help me figure out what to do.”

“Did she-”

“She didn’t do anything,” Cameron sighs. “I-I don’t know. It’s still so-so confusing. It’s still a lot to think about. I don’t even know where to start with telling you the story, and honestly… I’m still kind of freaked out about it, myself.” Cameron swallows the lump in his throat and sniffles. “I know it’s been a bad few days, and I’m sorry I was part of it. I’m sorry I wasn’t more careful, and I’m sorry if-”

“I’m so confused,” Greyson blinks a few times, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What do you mean she didn’t do anything? How did you not- Cameron . I saw you. I saw you all over her. I saw it happen. How is it possible…” He finds Cameron’s face again. Hurt, confusion, fear, all muddled up in one body. Two bodies. The both of them, one in the same. Greyson furrows his eyebrows, flickering between Cameron’s glassy eyes. He looked like he might cry at any second now. “Cameron…”

“You don’t have to believe me,” he says quietly. “I-I understand. I do. But… that’s all I really want to say at this point. I really… I’m having a hard time thinking about it all myself.”

Greyson is not a very trusting person, but something told him to believe in Cameron. Something told him that this was pure truth, pure emotion, spilling from Cameron’s split lips. Greyson nods, slowly, and he held his arms out. Cameron’s jaw trembles, and he leans into Greyson’s embrace. He doesn’t recall ever hugging Greyson before. He’s done a lot of things with him. He’s touched Greyson in a lot of ways, and even cuddled for a while after. But Greyson’s hugs were different.

Slender arms around his neck, his shoulder a place for Cameron’s face to call home. Fingers lacing through his hair soothingly, his breath

ghosting Cameron's ear, his embrace tight and firm but not crushing. He's warm like Florida winters, and soft like Rhode Island fall.

"Are you safe?" Greyson whispers into his hair. Cameron's lack of response is his answer. Greyson blinks back tears and holds on tighter. "How can we protect you?"

"I have to go back eventually," Cameron confesses. "I-I have practice tonight."

"Rowan will be there."

Cameron nods, but that doesn't help. Rowan versus an entire football team…

Greyson pulls away and scans his appearance, grimacing at the split in his lip. His thumb traces his mouth gently.

"The Hell did you do?" Greyson sighs. Cameron watches him intensely. Never has he wanted to kiss Greyson more. He didn't care if he got nothing else. He didn't care if it was a single kiss. He just wanted Greyson . "Did you go pick a fight?"

"I had to."

"You're a dumbass," Greyson groans, but can't hold back his smile. "I hate you so much."

"I know."

Greyson pulls him back in, and that warmth returns.

He's been running suicide sprints for twenty minutes now.

Apparently, their coaches got word of the… drama. The only reason Cameron knew this was because they have all been kept separated from each other all evening, and there are a total of three people not on the field right now. Liam was expected with the rumors of his condition swirling around, but after Cameron's interaction with him earlier in the day, he was surprised to not see Aiden, and even more surprised to see Bryce missing.

They stop long enough to get some water. Cameron ends up on the benches with Rowan, both heaving for breaths and ready to call the game quits. Rowan looked just as exhausted as Cameron is.

“You wanna tell me what happened to Liam?” Rowan asks in a low voice, as if trying to protect them from information that everybody else already knew. Cameron sips from his water bottle, eyes tracing the field.

“Couple broken bones and some police reports, probably,” Cameron mutters, looking back down at his cleats, scuffed up and mud-covered. Rowan looks at him expectantly. “He got what was coming to him.”

“Which resulted in your busted up hands and fucked face?” Rowan raises an eyebrow.

“The face was Aiden. Busted hands was Liam. I wouldn’t let him get another hit on me,” Cameron responds. Rowan nods slowly. “I’ll recover. Between everyone involved, I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Didn’t think you liked Greyson that much,” Rowan mentions, looking away. Cameron takes a breath in and holds it. “Thought you two were on bad terms.”

Cameron finally makes eye contact with his best friend, who pinches his lips together to hold back a cocky grin. Cameron rolls his eyes.

“You can get on my case when you tell me what’s going on with you and Luca, how about that?” Cameron offers.

“Touche.”

They run back onto the field to do some other drills.

Practice runs over today, with coaches pushing them harder to make up for the lack of people present. Cameron is dumping sweat by the end, despite the frigid temperatures and wet air that should make them colder. His skin is frozen to the touch, but his brow drips with sweat as they are called to circle up near the bleachers. Cameron catches his breath, swiping a hand over his face.

“So, as many of you know, we are down some players. The behavior exhibited by what once was some of our highlighted teammates is completely unacceptable and will not be tolerated,” their head coach announces. Eyes shift around, mostly in Cameron’s direction. “The school board asked me to break the news to you, that as of the end of the week, Liam Hindman and Aiden Leech will no longer be at Brown University on the grounds of the school’s zero tolerance policy. Bryce Peterson has been put on temporary leave and is suspended from sports for the remainder of the school year. With this being said, there

will need to be some changes."

The team mumbles and murmurs their questions and confusions, but eventually, they silence again to hear what they have to say.

"Three of our people on the bench will be moved onto the team, and some of your positions may be changed. Colton Lee, Jonah Camp, and Marcellus Jefferson, I expect to see you on the field on Sunday, be ready to play. I haven't finalized your positions yet, but you will receive an email by tomorrow night. As for Cunningham-"

All eyes on him. Cameron stands straighter, emotionless, easy. Is he getting kicked off? Is he getting benched?

"You will be assuming Bryce's old position as Quarterback and team captain. Harrison, you'll be co-captain and taking-"

Cameron's ears are ringing. He has to bite back a smile. He looks at Rowan as the coach deploys Rowan's new title onto him, and then a third teammate, who will be taking Cameron's position.

Quarterback.

Star of the show.

He's proud. He's excited. He's beaming.

He's gonna throw up.

They break, and Cameron is trembling as he walks away.

The locker room is abuzz with excited chatter, seemingly entirely moved on from the loss of three of their former, crucial, star teammates. Well– Aiden and Bryce were stars. Liam was only well known for his ability to fuck everything up.

One of the former-benchers claps Cameron on the shoulder, jostling him, grinning ear to ear.

"You saved us, man!" Jonah exclaims, beaming. "You fucking saved our ass from a miserable end to the season. If all it took to get those guys gone was a couple punches to the mouth, we should've done it a long time ago." The locker room mutters in conjoined agreement.

"I was so tired of Liam shoving us all around and making himself more important than the rest of us," someone else scoffs. "And Aiden? A fucking douchebag-"

“Maybe we can actually win a game and not look like total losers for once.”

The energy in the air isn’t hatred. It isn’t spite, or disdain, or even discomfort. It’s exciting. It’s joy. It’s relief.

Cameron looks to his best friend. His co-captain, and he smiles. They both do. This is the start to something beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

I am on a ROLL with this one. I swear I'm working on Read Between the Lines i SWEAR I just love this one so much right now it's picking up so fast I'm so excited. Also, I know the pace to this chapter was a little fast, and the style of it was weird, but again,,, being a lil experimental with how i break things up. Not sure how i feel about it just yet.

Anyways,,, how do we feel about this recovery? I know it was very cameron-centric, but i promise it will get very camson centric in the next one. It's all happening, folks! Good things coming!!!

Happy Monday, folks. I hope you are all doing marvelous. Until next time!
-hayl (@ hayloftown on twt)

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Passenger princess

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson hasn't dared to step out of his bubble since the fight.

Perhaps it was because his enrollment was in question with the dean, and maybe it was because his advisor was up his ass about why he picked a fight with the three most notable present attendees of the college, and maybe it was because he was scared– maybe it was a combination of it all. But inside he stayed.

He went to his classes, of course. He went to class and went home. He was on a temporary suspension from any clubs or sports until there's a final decision made by the deans, so he didn't need to worry about volleyball or tennis. He didn't have the group of friends most college students would, so he didn't have a reason to go out, and lord knows he doesn't go to parties. Not anymore.

He keeps his head down, and he plays it safe. He's quiet, secluded, and lonely. He's so fucking lonely.

Rowan has disappeared since their conversation the other day. According to Greyson's texts with Santiago, Luca has fallen off the face of the Earth too for the most part, only to be seen at night when he crashes in his bed, and in passing on campus. Whenever Rowan comes back, Greyson is typically asleep, so he's not entirely sure his roommate has come home at all in the past week or two. Greyson can use his imagination to figure out what's going on there. Either Greyson actually gave some good advice for once, or Rowan has been brutally murdered and Luca is covering it up. He has a feeling and an affinity for the first option.

Thanksgiving is right around the corner, and everyone is going home. At least, most everyone. Rowan is leaving the Saturday before and taking the week to be in Texas with his family. Luca leaves for North Carolina on Tuesday. Santiago is going north with some of his other friends for a "friendsgiving" in New Hampshire.

So, here he shall stay. Empty campus. Empty room.

Maybe it will be a good break from it all, he supposes.

Monday morning, there's a knock on his door. Greyson furrows his brow and slowly gets to his feet, shuffling toward his door. He peeks out the peephole, surprised to find Cameron on the opposite side.

"...Hi," Greyson greets as he swings his door open. Cameron stood on the other side, hands tucked into his pockets.

"Hey…" he cracks a small smile, blushy and cute.

Greyson hates it.

He's trying desperately to move on, to get past this phase of life. He's trying to get somewhere with his education, to lay low, and Cameron just won't let him.

But Cameron's smile… it's so perfect. Perfect teeth, lopsided grin that quirks up more on one side, almost like a smirk. His eyes get brighter and crinkled, all at the same time, and his cheekbones are pink with warmth.

"Rowan's gone for the week," Greyson states, biting his cheek. Cameron is studying him. He can tell. His eyes keep flickering from bruise to bruise, healing cut to healed scar. Greyson can tell he wants to ask. "I'm fine."

"I know," Cameron swallows, blinking himself back to reality. "A-About the Rowan thing. That's why I'm here."

"...Okay."

Greyson realizes this is going nowhere and sidesteps, letting Cameron in. He kicks his shoes aside as always and sunk onto Greyson's bed with the same small smile. Greyson wants to smack it off him, wants to kiss him, wants to hug him the same way he did in the music hall two weeks ago.

"What are your plans for Thanksgiving?" Cameron asks, straight out of the gate. Greyson shrugs.

"I dunno. I'm British. We don't do Thanksgiving."

"Okay…" He's smiling like he's thinking of something stupid. "Would you like to come to mine?"

Definitely something stupid.

“Excuse me?” Greyson recoils slightly, tightening his arms around himself. Cameron shrugs. “Like, at the frat? Fuck no.”

“Not at the frat, idiot,” Cameron rolls his eyes. “With my family.”

With his family.

“Oh,” Greyson doesn’t have any less surprise by this. “I-I mean… is that weird? Bringing some rando over for Thanksgiving?”

“I brought Rowan home last fall because his Dad was being an asshole,” Cameron shrugged. “My sisters tend to bring someone over each year too. We always seem to adopt the ones with nowhere to go for the holidays. You’re like my stray feral cat.”

How did he not know this? He was here last fall. He lived with Rowan last fall. Where was he when this was happening?

“Are you asking me as a guy who you want to sleep with, as a friend, or as someone you have a crush on?”

“That’s… blunt,” Cameron scoffs. “Does it matter?”

“Well, I don’t want to sleep with you in your childhood bedroom if that means anything.”

“I don’t want to sleep with anyone in my childhood bedroom. I shared with my older sister,” Cameron scoffs. “Secondly, I stay in a hotel out of the neighborhood. You can only handle so much of my father’s voice in the middle of the night when he’s rewatching football games.”

Greyson stares at him for a long moment before realizing-

“Doesn’t your family live in Florida?”

“And?”

“And we are in Rhode Island. Isn’t that, like, two different sides of the country?”

“Well, do you consider it different sides when you’re on the same coast?” Cameron shrugs. Greyson waits. “Yeah, it’s a bit of traveling, but-”

“I can’t just buy a flight to Florida on a holiday weekend-”

For starters, he’s not rich . He doesn’t have Daddy’s money, unless you’re talking about Daddy’s life insurance, which funds his flights to England and back every Christmas and summer, and a good chunk of his education. Secondly: even if he did have the money, does Cameron realize how impossible it is to get a flight the week of Thanksgiving? Does he have any idea how tough it is to do anything the week of a holiday? He has higher chances at winning the lottery.

“I’m driving.”

“Jesus Christ,” Greyson laughs incredulously, unable to withhold his comment and pacing away from him. “You’re *driving* . To Florida!”

“Yes.”

Of course he is. He’s Cameron .

“How long does that even take?” Greyson asks back.

Why he’s even entertaining this is uncertain. He should be telling Cameron how ridiculous it is to drive that far on a whim, how stupid it is and expensive it is to get that much gas during the drive, not to mention all the food they have to purchase on the way down, and the hotels…

“Well, if we started right now and took breaks to stop and admire the views and maybe overnight in South Carolina, I would say… a day and a half? If we just drove straight down, 19 hours.”

“You asked me that casually to-to drive across the country with you on a whim for the week.”

“Yeah,” Cameron says with a small smirk, sitting forward with his elbows pressed to his knees. “Pack a bag of clothes. We start driving, grab lunch in Connecticut, maybe stop by New York City for a museum, haul it to Washington DC, stop for dinner, drive until late and end up in the Carolina’s, stay in a motel overnight, and a few states later, we’re in Florida by, like, tomorrow night.”

Tomorrow night. It feels like a century away. It feels like the dumbest plan he’s ever heard.

“You’re fucking insane.”

“And you love it,” Cameron mentions. Greyson just stares at him, mouth agape, amazed by his idiocy and his hubris.

“How many concussions have you had since becoming captain?” Cameron doesn’t answer the question. He just keeps smiling. Greyson’s breath hitches. “I’m-I’m still off my game since the thing with Liam and Aiden and-”

He doesn’t need a defense. He doesn’t need an excuse. He can just tell him “no”. He can just say he doesn’t want to, and that’s the end of it. It’s not like Cameron will kidnap him for a drive to Florida. Just say no-

“And maybe that’s a sign that you need to get off campus,” Cameron proposes. Greyson laughs to himself, shaking his head. “Wednesday, Thursday, Friday in Florida, drive back up Saturday first thing. Be back by mid Sunday at the latest… What else do I need to do? What do I need to say? Get on my knees and beg?”

A silent dorm. A quiet campus. A lonely dining hall with shitty turkey and slimey gravy. A call from his mother, pitiful that he’s alone again. Talking to his sister for a little too long to fill the time and the silence.

Versus an indefinite amount of driving, of complaining, of singing and laughing and sticking his head out the window like a dog. Versus a week of adventure he would never be brave enough to do without someone as confident, as sure of himself, as Cameron.

“I think I hate this… this confidence that you’ve adopted,” Greyson decides, running a hand through his hair. No. Just say no. Just turn him down. “Okay.”

That’s not no.

“Okay?” Cameron’s eyes light up.

Yes.

“Okay,” Greyson exhales. “How long until we leave?”

“Now. As in, the second you’re done packing a bag.”

“What?”

“Pack a bag, idiot!” Cameron exclaims, jumping to his feet. “I will go

home, get my shit, load up the car, and I'll be here in, like, thirty minutes. Be ready."

"Jesus Christ-" Greyson groans. "Can I take it back? I don't wanna-"

"Nope," Cameron claps him on the shoulder and scurries past him. "See you on the road."

The door clicks shut behind Cameron, and suddenly, Greyson is alone in his dorm for the last time until Sunday. He stares at the door for a long moment, and realizes he has no clue where he put his suitcase.

What did he get himself into?

When Greyson gets the ' here' text, his stomach plummets. He looks down at the bag he packed for the trip, a duffel bag with a couple days worth of clothes and toiletries, and at his appearance in the mirror.

He can't do this.

He can't.

Right?

He feels like he's missing something. He feels like he's doing something wrong. He should text his mother, ask her if it's alright, ask if it's a good idea. He should stay home and do homework, or work on writing a plea for forgiveness to his deans, and work on finding a way to dig himself out of this hole he's in. He should talk to Santiago first. He should say something, do something. He can't just… drop everything and drive to the opposite end of the country.

Can he?

Sure, he's an adult. He's a twenty two year old man with free will, living across the Atlantic ocean from his mother. Sure, he goes for drives and adventures all the time without asking first. But she always knows. And he never does anything too crazy. Too impulsive. This is impulsive. This is crazy.

This is crazy.

He ruffles his hair in the mirror again, covering a small cut on his

forehead from the fight. He tugs on his hoodie to cover him better, pulling on the sleeves and thumbing at the bruise under his eye, as if it would erase the marking. It doesn't.

He shoulders the bag, takes a deep breath, and steps out of his dorm.

He's doing this.

He descends the stairs quickly and meets Cameron in the parking lot. His car was stopped near the door, and he was staring down at his phone as he waited. Greyson approaches the car, and Cameron looks up, getting the biggest, stupidest smile on his face Greyson has ever seen. Greyson attempts one back.

This is crazy. And he's doing it.

He dumps his bag in the back seat of Cameron's car. He realizes, finally, he's never seen Cameron drive before, never seen his car, never knew of him being a man with a license. Does he drive safely? Is his car clean? When was the last time he wiped down the center console? When did he last get his airbags checked? Has he ever been in an accident before?

It's a Honda CRV. Greyson makes a mental note to check the safety rating later.

"You didn't bail. I'm impressed," Cameron mentions as Greyson sunk into the passenger seat.

He instantly clicks his seatbelt before anything else. Safety, all that. Greyson takes a mental note of the car. The floor mats are recently vacuumed. There's not a whole lot of dust on the dash. The only sign of life really is some loose change in the cup holders and a jacket hung from the back of Cameron's seat.

"I was tempted," Greyson says in a half-joking tone. Cameron rolls his eyes.

"You'll be fine. Worst case scenario, you get stuck in a foreign state with no way home," Cameron mentions. Greyson's jaw clenches. "I'm kidding, cool it. You'll be fine." He squeezes Greyson's knee, and he gets the gurgle and swirl of his gut again that comes with Cameron's touch. Exciting. Nauseating. Lovely as can be.

Cameron checks that Greyson's seatbelt is in place before putting the car in reverse. His arm tucks behind Greyson's seat, and he looks over

his shoulder as he reverses. Greyson is still reeling from the touch. He doesn't have the mental capacity to swoon over the arms, the jaw, the concentration on his face.

Thirty minutes into the drive, Cameron realizes that Greyson is quite possibly the worst passenger ever.

He has compiled a playlist that is long enough to span the entire drive down and back, and potentially a second trip if they happened to forget a charger or something back in Kissimmee. He also has mapped out a schedule of the rest of their day down to the minute they are allowed to pee (despite the fact that he's already mentioned he needs to pee). Worst of all, he is restless .

Cameron loves it.

"How many states have you been to since you moved here?" Cameron asks as they approach the Rhode Island-Connecticut border on I-95 South.

"Uh… two?" Greyson shrugs. "Rhode Island and Massachusetts."

"Really?" Cameron cringes. "There's, like, an entire country out there and you've stuck to two New England states?"

"Where else would I go?" Greyson asks back, head tucked against the headrest, watching the mile-markers dip lower and lower every half mile, until they read 0.5.

"Well… on this drive alone, you'll be going through 10 different states, not counting Rhode Island," Cameron hums. "Starting with… Connecticut."

Greyson watches with wondrous eyes as they pass the *Welcome to Connecticut* sign, sitting forward in his seat. Cameron glances over with a small smile. "Welcome to Stonington, Connecticut, home of the Bears, and just about nothing else."

"Wow," Greyson smiles with a roll of his eyes. "So very different from Rhode Island, I tell you."

"Shut up," Cameron smacks his leg playfully. "Pick a better song. This one sucks."

"You suck," Greyson shot back, but grabs the phone plugged into the AUX.

He hits shuffle five times and lets the phone choose something new, playing some pop-punk song from 2014 on Cameron's phone. Greyson lifts his eyebrows and scans the lyrics, looking back at Cameron, who was mouthing the lyrics as he checks over his shoulder, merging into the passing lane. Greyson's eyes glaze over with that same lust he always gets when Cameron does something perfectly normal, like take a sip from his water bottle, or stuff his hands in his pockets, or more recently, play piano.

" *Get Down on Your Knees and Tell Me You Love Me* , " Greyson reads aloud, glancing at Cameron with a knowing smile. "You trying to tell me something?"

"If you're willing," Cameron teases back. Greyson can't help but be more enamored with how dorky and stupid he is.

The guitar riff rattles through Greyson's gut, and he imagines what tonight will be like, hanging out in a warm motel with Cameron. Will they get one bed or two? Will they end up sleeping together? Will this feeling in Greyson's gut ever ease up, or is he car sick?

Did you mean it, did you feel it, when you broke into my head -

Greyson glances at his phone, at the texts waiting from his mother, at the missed call from her too. He should feel guilty. He should feel mean.

"Whenever you want lunch, let me know and I'll pull over," Cameron announces over the song. Greyson shifts in his seat.

"I should probably wait until we're deeper into the drive before we take our first break," Greyson says, taking a breath. "But I do need to pee-"

"Oh my God-" Cameron groans. "Shut up about your stupid bladder!"

"Well if you didn't spring a road trip on me, maybe I would have peed before we left!"

"I would've waited the thirty seconds it took you to pee-"

"If it's only taking you thirty seconds, you are not washing your hands properly."

"It's an exaggeration, doofus."

Greyson huffs, bouncing his knee and rolling his eyes. Cameron makes some mumble of *roll them enough and they'll roll away* . Neither one of them can help but smile, though. No matter how annoying. No matter how silly all this is. They smile.

Late lunch in New York City with a little wandering is how they decide to stretch their legs at the four hour mark.

"I think this is the weirdest day I have ever had in my life, and it is only 2:00 PM," Greyson confesses as he sips his soda. Cameron cocks his head to the side as Greyson analyzes his sandwich. "I have never been the adventurous type. My mother just about had a heart attack when she found out I was going to a University that wasn't in my hometown, nevermind in another country."

"Is your mother a hover-er?" Cameron asks between bites, covering his mouth with his hand. There is something incredibly attractive about a man who doesn't spit his food while he speaks. Greyson shrugs.

"I suppose?" Greyson hums. "Not… not over us. A little bit over us? I dunno…" Cameron doesn't look any less confused. "My father was sick my entire childhood, so we were always supposed to be on our best behavior and stay close to home in case anything happened. If we came home with the sniffles, we would be quarantined in our bedroom. There was no such thing as traveling, and definitely no going into the city. She is the most agoraphobic woman I have ever met in my life."

"That's a lot coming from you," Cameron says with a lighthearted chuckle.

"Shut up," Greyson groans, but takes a bite. Cameron studies him for a moment– his posture, his mannerisms. He seems so… relaxed. He seems to welcome this chaos better than Cameron anticipated.

"What happened to him?" Cameron asks. Greyson glances up, raising his eyebrows. "Your dad. You mentioned he passed…" Cameron scans Greyson's face.

"He did," Greyson says casually, looking back at his sandwich again. "He passed away six years ago. The Flu-turned-pneumonia-turned-lung-failure. Nasty way to go."

"All from a normal bug?" Cameron frowns. Greyson nods.

“Yeah,” he huffs. “That’s why we couldn’t do anything. During flu season, we were the first to get our flu shots, we didn’t leave the house other than school, and if any of our classmates or friends were sick, we had to take extra precautions. I just so happened to… to want to spend his birthday with him, hid my stuffy nose from the family, and… well, learned my lesson, didn’t I?”

“Jesus…” Cameron frowns. “That’s heavy. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s mine,” Greyson shrugs. “I should’ve known better. I did know better. I stopped questioning my mother’s madness after that.”

“Even if it was already too late?”

“Yeah,” Greyson sips his drink again. “If she was right about that… surely she has to be right about other things, too.”

Cameron wants to carry this burden for him. He wants to shoulder the baggage of grief and guilt, for even a moment, to let Greyson process. He is so nonchalant about the details. He’s so casual about it all, like he’s not only accepted it, but completely moved past it. Sure, there’s no changing the past, but… This felt like a little more than a casual lunch conversation. Perhaps Cameron was to blame for that part, though.

“And yet you still came along?” Cameron asks.

“Well…” Greyson smiles sadly. “First time I ignored her, I fucked up real bad. Second time, I moved across the country and ended up at a school where I faced a lot of harassment. Maybe third betrayal is the charm?”

“That’s putting a whole lot of faith in me,” Cameron murmurs.

“No pressure. Just the fate of my future in your hands,” Greyson cracks a devious smile. “Try not to ruin all hopes of being normal.”

“You lost any chance at normalcy long before me,” Cameron scoffs, his foot nudging Greyson’s under the table. Greyson nudges back. “I’m sorry about your dad, though. Really. I haven’t lost a parent, but… I can imagine it sucks. When my Dad was deployed, the worry was always there. If you ever wanna talk about it…”

“You get used to it,” Greyson reassures. “Six years and all. Sometimes the wound reopens, burns a bit. Sometimes the memories get coffee

stained. But I think there's this… this fact of life, that most people will eventually live a life without their parents one day. My day just came sooner than most."

"Did the thing your Dad gave you get salvaged after the fight?"

"For the most part," he nods. "Rowan and Luca helped me lay them out to dry. A couple got some tears and they're stained, but they're still legible."

"Good," Cameron lets out a breath of relief. "Good."

Greyson takes another bite of his sandwich, like this conversation was casual, like it was easy. Cameron was amazed that he so comfortably had his appetite still. He traces the lid to his drink, and Greyson stares at his knuckles, still green and a few splits still healing.

"You never told me the story," Greyson states, nodding to Cameron's hand. "Who'd you hit?"

"Liam," Cameron states. Greyson hums, satisfied with that answer.

"What's the damage?"

"Me? None. Other than Aiden coming at me. Him, on the other hand…" Cameron puffs out a breath. "A couple breaks. A couple bruises. He's out of a house. I know you heard about the expulsion-"

"Thank God."

"Yeah," Cameron shrugs. "It felt… too easy, y'know?" Greyson nods. "It's hard to settle still."

"Because of the Allie thing?"

"Because of all of it," Cameron confesses. "The Allie thing. Stuff that happened with them before Aiden and Liam got kicked out of campus. The stuff that happened with you…" They make eye contact. Greyson's eyes are pretty in this lighting. Warm brown. Fallish. "We're always gonna be looking over our shoulders."

"Comes with the identity," Greyson snickers, picking up his drink to 'cheers' with Cameron. They meet in the middle with the paper cups softly clunking together and taking sips.

When they finish eating and clean their mess, they buy a couple water bottles for the road and some snacks to pick at before heading back to

the car. Greyson is amazed by the sheer amount of high rises that ascend past the clouds and the vastness of people flooding the streets. He's never seen anything like this before. He's never seen a world so busy, so overwhelming, so beautifully human.

Greyson hovers closer to Cameron's side for safety– the people bump his shoulders and skirt past him too close, interrupting the perfection of the bubble he wrapped himself in. There is something disruptive, something disgusting, about the nature of man, and there is something inherently safe in hiding at Cameron's side, who didn't seem to mind the bumping and passing as much.

Cameron wants to hold his hand. Their knuckles brush every time their arms swing past one another. They are so incredibly close in the busy streets of Manhattan, and Cameron wants to just… hold his hand. No one will know any different. No one will notice. The city is the one place you can be yourself and no one will spare a glance. The city is the one place where no one knows either of them, their histories, their families, their anything .

Cameron restrains himself, though, and they arrive at the carside without further interruption of thought.

Greyson looks pretty in the passenger seat. Cameron looks natural in the drivers side. He sunk down with a huff behind the wheel, checking his mirrors and sparing a glance at Greyson. They have both moved on from the insanity that is a last-second road trip, melting into a sense of warmth and familiarity in one another.

"You know, if you had your license, I would be making you drive the next four and a half hours. I think I deserve a break," Cameron scoffs, throwing the car in reverse as he slowly attempts to get out of the parallel-parking situation they were in.

"Yeah, no. I don't drive. I'm more than happy to take control of the AUX and give directions, though," Greyson smirks up at him.

"Yeah, yeah, passenger princess."

"Oh, honey, are you calling me royalty?" Greyson feigns, earning a roll of the eyes from Cameron. "I'm honored."

The streets of New York are crazy. Greyson wouldn't drive down them if you paid him a million dollars. God no– he's more than happy here, watching Cameron's knuckles tense against the leather steering wheel, seeing his eyes flicker between his mirrors and the road, watching the

art that is his composure when the roads are overwhelming and ridiculously mayhem.

They get through Pennsylvania without complaint– Greyson seemingly gets a longer and longer tolerance for sitting in the car the longer they drive. Cameron keeps quiet about it, though, as to not jinx himself.

In Delaware, Greyson began to whine. He needs to pee. He wants to stretch his legs. He wants to run a lap. He's tired. He's hungry. Cameron is tempted to smack a piece of duct tape over his mouth to make him shut up, and tempted to appease his every complaint. He's just excited to be here. He's excited that Greyson is here.

They stopped at a gas station at the end of Delaware to fill up. Cameron was only at half-tank– he didn't fill up entirely before the trip– but he still felt the need to get Greyson out of his passenger seat for a few minutes. They stood under the lights of the Shell Station covering, Greyson stretching out his limbs and back– Cameron tries to convince him to go to the bathroom, but to no avail.

"I would rather die than step foot in a gas station bathroom."

"Then where are you going to go, idiot?" Cameron asks, punching in his pin-code for his debit card. The machine accepts it after a short delay. Greyson shrugs.

"I'll wait until we stop for food."

"You are ridiculous," Cameron states blankly. "I will purposefully wait as long as possible to stop for food if you don't go now."

"Cam!"

"Greyson," Cameron warns. "Look– there's a Dunkin' right there. If you're too much of a priss to use a gas station urinal, walk to Dunkin' and get me a red bull while you're at it."

"You're so mean," Greyson huffs, but stands upright.

"So mean," Cameron agrees with a small smile as Greyson pats his pockets for his wallet and walks away toward the Dunkin' Donuts. "Grab me two!"

"You're lucky if you get anything," Greyson calls back.

Cameron watches him leave with a smile, leaning back against his car

and watches the monitor roll higher and higher as his tank fills with gas.

Greyson thinks this Dunkin' is the weirdest place he's ever stepped foot inside of– it's like a Lotus Casino. The energy feels weird. It smells delicious, the employees all have smiles on their faces (despite working quite possibly one of the worst jobs) and there's not a single patron inside. Greyson slides into one of the bathrooms, which he deems less disgusting than the gas station. Not perfect, but better.

Washing his hands, he gets a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror.

He forgot about the damage.

The road trip was such a spur of the moment decision. All of this was so chaotic, he forgot about himself. About the healing black eye. About the few cuts and scrapes on his face. He wonders how Cameron's family will feel about this– will they think he's a bad influence? Will they hate him? Will he care?

Cameron has never once said something negative about his family. At least, not to Greyson. He can't help but wonder if this whole trip was more than just a friendly place to stay for the holidays, but an initiation. A trial.

He wets his fingers and plays with his hair a bit, and once more, tries to swipe away the bruises and scrapes with some water, as if they will disappear like a magic eraser polished him clean. It doesn't work, of course, but a man can try.

He circles back out to the counter, grabbing a couple red bulls for Cameron and some powerade for himself, giving the boy at the counter a small smile.

"Is that all?" he asks, looking Greyson over eagerly. Greyson bites his cheek, scanning the menu briefly.

"Can I also grab a honey bun?" Greyson requests.

"Sure thing. Honey for the honey," the boy says, turning to get the pastry. "You want that warmed up?"

Still stunned from the comment, Greyson hesitates to answer. He blinks a few times and opens his mouth to respond, only giving a nod.

"Coming right up. Your total is on the screen."

Greyson pays by card, taking the drinks into his arm and drifting over to the other side of the counter to pick his food up. He leans against the counter and studies the boy who so blatantly flirted with him. He's not unattractive, but he has an odd accent, and his voice is too… crisp. Too perfect. He doesn't have the slight lisp around certain sounds, and he doesn't smile crookedly, and his hair is too dark, and his skin is too tan and clean, and he's too… too much *not Cameron.*

"You are the worst." Greyson lifts his gaze and smiles at Cameron who walks into the Dunkin with a small smile, hands tucked into his pockets. "I was starting to think you fell in."

"I wanted a treat."

"And apparently, you wanted to play with your hair a bit," Cameron murmurs, reaching up and pushing it around so it was something similar to what it was prior to Greyson fixing it in the bathroom. "We're not even halfway into the trip and you are the most restless person I have ever met."

"Where I come from, to get across the country means a couple hours on a train, not twenty-something in a car," Greyson says back, eyeing him up and down. His smile, crooked and cute. His skin is pale despite all his time outside. Not quite blond, not quite brunette. Pretty eyes. His sibilance isn't as sharp. His freckles…

"I'm gonna use the bathroom," Cameron decides. "Don't go running off. I'll be back in a second."

"Wash your hands."

"Yeah, yeah."

Shortly after Cameron disappears, the employee returns with a bag of warm pastry, setting it on the counter in front of him. His eyes are curious, hungry, exploring Greyson like he had X-ray vision. Greyson murmurs a soft *thanks* , turning to head back to the car.

"How long are you in town for?"

Greyson's stomach drops.

"Uh, only passing through," Greyson says back, awkwardly turning back to face him. "Headed south."

"Oh, hon… the south doesn't do guys like us well. I'd recommend

staying up here."

"Well, holidays, y'know?" Greyson says hesitantly, eyeing the hall Cameron disappeared down.

"What's a guy like you doing celebrating Thanksgiving?" he questions. "Nevermind traveling for it?"

"Long story," Greyson says with an attempted smile.

"You have time."

Greyson shifts uncomfortably. He just wanted a snack. He can't help but wonder if the car is unlocked, or if he should just walk away like that. Nothing more. No more weird uncomfortable flirting. No more awkward encounters. Just him, Cameron, and the road.

"Well…" Greyson shrugs, adjusting his hold on his belongings.

"Hey, let me take some of this," Cameron suddenly appears next to him again, his cold hands still slightly wet brushing Greyson's skin as he takes the cans from his arms. "Thank you. Ready?"

Greyson is still making eye contact with the employee. Cameron looks between them and slowly, his smile falls. He draws an arm around Greyson's shoulders.

"Everything alright?"

"Perfectly fine," Greyson says back, looking up at him with an award-winning smile, one that claims Cameron as his, one that shows himself as Cameron's. He would rather be property to his hookup than free real estate by the weird stranger. "Let's hit the road."

As they skirt out the door, Cameron pulls Greyson a little closer, whispering into his head.

"He seemed weird."

"He was," Greyson murmurs back, leaning into the embrace. "Thanks."

"Yeah."

Cameron released him the moment they get back to the car, but Greyson felt cold without his arm. He felt lonely without his touch. Unsafe without his presence. They are swift to return to one another

in the car, though, buckled and leaving the awkward energy behind in the oddest coffee shop they've ever set foot into.

They max out on their travel in Petersburg, Virginia.

While the intention was to get into the Carolina's, the rain and sheer exhaustion of driving all day finally caught up to them, and they decided to hunker down and find a motel for the night.

Cameron called ahead to a few asking about vacancies before finally deciding on one. Cameron goes into the office to check in and get a key, while Greyson sat back in the car and let his eyes rest shut. He doesn't think he's ever been this tired in his life. He doesn't think he's ever spent this much time in a car in his life. His arms folded around himself and his head propped against the head rest, his eyes fall shut, and he listens to the rain patter against the windshield soothingly.

It takes a horrifically long time for Cameron to pay for the motel and get their keys. Greyson thinks there's a chance he got a good catnap between Cameron leaving and his return. The sound of the door opening jolts him awake. Cameron sunk into the drivers seat.

"Key for you," Cameron passes it into Greyson's palm. Greyson is tempted to wrap his fingers around Cameron's on instinct. He doesn't. "Room 156."

It's a short drive around the building, and they have a parking space directly in front of their door. Greyson and Cameron both gather their bags and shuffle under the awning, Greyson playing with the lock until it clicks open. He uses his hip to push the door open, flicking on the lights.

It's a nice room. Better than Greyson anticipated, to be honest. The walls are a decent shade of green, and the room smells like cleaning supplies. Dust doesn't collect on the surfaces, and the bed is made nicely. The bed. Singular.

"So much for not wanting to sleep with me," Greyson smirks up at Cameron. Cameron claps him on the shoulder.

"I did not say I didn't want to sleep with you. I said I wouldn't sleep with you in my childhood bedroom," Cameron corrects. Greyson shakes his head, plopping his duffel bag onto the small table near the window. "If you truly hate me that much, I can ask for a room with two beds."

“I’m not complaining. I’m just calling you a hypocrite,” Greyson says back.

“Fuck off, I have never once been hypocritical,” Cameron argues. “I make it very well known that you are the only person I want to sleep with.”

“Mhm.”

“And I think, intrinsically, that also means I usually, if not always, want to sleep with you.”

“Are you a sex addict?” Greyson asks with a small laugh, facing away from him and checking his bag for his toothbrush. A hand passes over his hip, and his smile widens.

“For you? Perhaps.”

Greyson laughs again as Cameron’s lips tuck against his cheek and his arms snake around Greyson’s waist. Greyson leans back against his chest, plucking a brochure off the table and scanning it as Cameron peppers a couple kisses down to his shoulder. It’s been a while since they’ve done anything. It’s been a while since Greyson wanted anything to do with this side of his life. He was trying to get over it. He was trying to move past it.

He doesn’t want to move past it. Not at all.

“Oh! There’s a bar down the street with some interesting feature cocktails.” Cameron scoffs out a laugh, letting his head fall against Greyson’s neck. “C’mon. We get a drink or two, old times sake. Maybe they have a pool table.”

“You? Playing pool?” Cameron asks with a smile. “I’d love to see that.”

“Yeah?” Greyson hums. “Let’s go.”

“Fine, fine… But we’re walking. I won’t drive back if we’re drunk.”

“I love the rain. Works for me.”

Greyson pulls his hood over his head and grabs Cameron by the wrist, tugging him back out the door. Cameron laughs as Greyson eagerly yanks him along to cross the street to the bar. Cameron stumbles behind him, his wrist burning with warmth under Greyson’s fingers.

The bar is unusually crowded for a Monday night, but they pay it no mind– Cameron finds them a table, and Greyson heads to the bar to order two drinks.

Saint Motel blasts from the overhead speakers. Cameron watches Greyson closely as he so happily orders from the blue and black haired bartender, covered in tattoos and piercings. The bartender seemed to be having a great night herself, performing her art in front of the patrons who sat at her bar, smiling and laughing with her. Greyson is bouncing with excitement, like a bubbly little kid, as he waits for the drinks. Cameron has never seen him so happy. He's never seen him so… loose.

Greyson slides his card across the counter upon request to open a tab. He looks over his shoulder to find Cameron already looking at him. His cheeks flash red. Cameron immediately looks down at the menu on their standing table, not-so-slyly trying to peak back up. Greyson looks away, too.

"Rum and coke and a raspberry vodka," the bartender announces, setting it in front of him. Greyson takes the two glasses closer to himself. "I expect to see you back at this counter in ten."

"Thank you," Greyson says, struggling not to snicker at her comment. He turns and strolls back to Cameron. "I took a guess on what you like."

"I do rum and something sweet."

"Close enough," Greyson states, setting the glass in front of him. "Rum and coke."

"You tried," Cameron shakes his head, meeting their glasses in the middle of the table for a cheers . "Thank you for coming on an adventure with me."

"Thank you for inviting me," Greyson says. Cameron raises an eyebrow.

"Really?"

Greyson takes hold of his straw and swirls the drink slowly, sipping it down. The bartender was heavy handed with the vodka, but he wasn't complaining. Not at all. He glances over his shoulder again. The girl is doing some fancy flips and tricks for the crowd in front of her, and her partner on the other end of the counter is cheering her on. The crowd

of mostly men and the occasional couple sitting around her are cheering.

“Really,” Greyson decides, looking back at him again. Cameron leans against the table top, watching Greyson take another sip and contemplate his next words very carefully. “I… I think you are the exact person I needed.”

“Do I want to know what that means?” Cameron cocks his head to the side, lifting his glass to his lips.

“Well…”

Greyson would never do this a few years ago. One year ago. A few months ago. Even a few weeks ago. This is so far out of his comfort zone, this is something he never saw himself doing. Traveling the United States on a whim with someone he barely knows? Putting his faith, his life, in Cameron’s hands? Going to random bars and stopping at random gas stations and going to *New York City* ?

This is insanity.

“I don’t know,” Greyson finally confesses. “You just… make me different.”

“Good,” Cameron says. “God forbid I had to deal with the same old you for a minute longer…”

“Hey-” Greyson smacks his arm playfully. “I just… I mean, you have brought out a part of me that I thought I would never experience. This… this is the craziest thing I have ever done. This is the most fun I have ever had.”

“We’re not even in Florida yet,” Cameron laughs. “We’re barely a day into the adventure.”

“Isn’t that the best part?” Greyson asks. “That… that we haven’t even seen most of this trip yet, and I’m already feeling like I’m on top of the world?”

Cameron can’t stop laughing– he can’t tell if the three sips of his drink have Greyson already drunk, or if Greyson is really just this easily impressed, or if Greyson just needed a change that badly, but… it was great. It was beautiful. Greyson’s smile, the light in his eyes, the sheer excitement radiating off of him… Cameron has never seen him like this before. Cameron has never seen him so pleasant. Never seen him

so happy to be alive.

As told, they are getting a refill of their drink within ten minutes.

Cameron gets them some waters after that to chill out, and they find the pool table tucked away into a corner. A game was finishing up between some big burly men who looked like they could step on Greyson and crush him. Cameron tucked an arm around Greyson's shoulder and watched with a smug smile as Greyson studied the table, as if he was mentally plotting every move before the men performed them.

"You lookin' to be next up?" One of the guys asks Cameron. He's wearing a leather vest with the sleeves torn off, and his mustache is gross from dipping into his frothy beer. His beard touches his belly from its length, peppered with grays. He kind of reminds Cameron of one of his great uncles on his Dad's side.

"Me? No," Cameron chuckles. "I've never played."

"I'll go," Greyson claims. The men scoff, looking Greyson over with interest. The second one standing beside long-beard is balding and tattooed up his face with a snake curling toward his eyebrow and a septum piercing that is so broad it makes his nose bulge. Greyson wonders if it's uncomfortable to sneeze.

"Buddy, I think you're better suited for a tennis skirt than-"

Greyson pulls the balls from their respective pockets and swirls them around in the designated triangle, grabbing the cue ball. He takes a cue stick from the wall and, without much of a glance, serves the cue ball and spins three separate solids into three separate pockets. He sits back on his heels and looks back at Snake Tattoo and Long-Beard.

"I might not wear skirts, but I do play tennis," Greyson says with an easy grin, leaning against the table. "And I also play billiards. Who wants to be stripes?"

Cameron sits back against the wall with a proud smile. The men share a look and, eventually, choose Snake Tattoo to play for them. Cameron sips his water down some and watches as Greyson destroys them in as little as four turns.

They rerack, and the men order a round of drinks for the four of them– that's the rules. Whoever loses buys the next round. They, unfortunately, have terrible taste and order them the most dull, bread-

y tasting beer the bar has on tap, but Greyson won't pass up free alcohol. He lets long beard serve, and hell, gives him an extra pity shot, just to see how it goes. Worse than last time– it takes only two turns for Greyson to line up every solid and bat them into the pockets, and a third turn to sink the 8 ball. Another round.

They are trying to get Greyson inebriated enough to lose. The bar slowly starts to circle around them, trying to all take turns against Greyson. Cameron happily sips down free drink after free drink, smirking as Greyson, *his* Greyson, defeats a bar full of older southern men who are too proud to accept their losses.

"Is there something you just… know about this? Is there a trick?" Snake Tattoo asks, leaning over the table to watch as Greyson lines up a shot with the 8 ball. "You're slanted-"

"No I'm not."

"You're slanted. Look. You're gonna miss the-"

Greyson bats the cue, and it spins, doing a fancy little twirl back around to click the 8 ball in the corner pocket. He looks back up at Snake Tattoo.

"Not slanted, and not a trick," Greyson states. "Just math."

Cameron has never swooned so hard for a man in his life.

Of course Greyson is attractive. Of course he's fascinating, and he's so obviously on Cameron's mind, but his *confidence* , what was once an annoying hubris has become a confident truth: Greyson is not just full of himself. He is not just an annoying know-it-all prick. He's an annoying know-it-all beauty, who's brain should be studied by science, and who's body has been studied by Cameron. He is perfect in the way that he is not: Cameron finds him annoyingly handsome, and horrifically charming in the way that Greyson can't help but brag.

That's his guy.

They leave a generous tip for the bartender, and Greyson spends a while giving the mathematical equations on lining up different positions to his new biker friends, once foes. The bartender slides Greyson's card back across the counter to Cameron, eyeing him.

"You got a good one," she murmurs. "Keep him close before someone else tries to snag him."

Cameron tucks Greyson's card into his wallet, and he looks at Greyson in the corner of the bar, being cheered on by all these big burly men who, if they were straight, most certainly had a semblance of a man-crush on him now.

"I know," Cameron sighs. "One hell of a catch."

Chapter End Notes

ROAD TRIP !!!! WOOOOO!!!

Not quite the longest chapter ever, but hey, a good 40 pages!! I'm having fun. You are too. This is a threat. (not really im kidding no threats here nope).

Anyways. Happy Monday. Have a chapter. Another one coming SoonTM
Until next time o7
-hayl (@hayloftown on twt)

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Cloud Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson wakes the next morning wearing minimal clothing, tangled in the sheets, and wrapped in Cameron's embrace.

His headache lingers, and the aftertaste of alcohol still sits on his tongue. There's a reason you're not supposed to mix drinks, and this pulsating rhythm in his brain is why. Greyson's hand passes over Cameron's bare arm and he slowly blinks his eyes open. Light floods the room through the cracks of the curtains, letting a stream of sunshine splay down Cameron's spine.

Cameron's head rests on Greyson's chest, his face squished from his firm embrace. His legs tangled with Greyson's. One of Greyson's arms is drawn around Cameron's shoulders, holding him close. Their hands are laced together on the bed beside them. Cameron's lips slightly part with passing breaths that ghost over Greyson's chest.

He doesn't know quite how last night went. He knew it was fun. He knew they made it back. He knew they might have let the fun continue behind closed doors. But what time they returned, and what time he finally fell asleep, he has no idea. What he does know, though, is that he had his greatest night of sleep he's ever had.

He's warm. He's safe. Like his own personal weighted blanket laid over him, Greyson accepted his fate of being resigned to the bed.

He rubs his eyes, and he leans down to tuck his lips against the top of Cameron's head. He didn't want to get up. Not now. Not ever. Tagging along for this trip was the best stupid decision he ever made.

Cameron's alarm goes off ten minutes later.

Cameron writhes and groans and eventually makes it shut up, burying his face in Greyson's chest as he slowly wakes. Greyson traces through his hair and held on firmly until Cameron eventually lifts his head and looks at the time on the clock. He lets out a low huff and rolls off of

Greyson.

“Come back. You were warm,” Greyson chases his body heat, scooting after Cameron helplessly. Cameron laughs into the mattress as Greyson winds around him like a koala, pressed against his back.

“I need a shower,” Cameron murmurs with an amused smile. “You are welcome to join.”

“That may have been the sexiest thing you have ever said to me.”

The shower is a little small for two grown men, but that’s part of the fun– there’s no fighting over water when there’s no way to get away from it. Their giggles echo off the shower tiles, and Greyson thinks he’s never felt safer kissing someone, touching someone, breathing in someone. His fingers trace Cameron’s ribs, polishing his skin. He finds Cameron’s peppered hickeys hilarious. He looks not just beautiful, all marked up by Greyson, but also very funny, knowing that the big tough man like Cameron is so easily weakened, bruised, noted with bits of love.

Love . Greyson laughs to himself at the idea. He’s not sure he would call it that.

They pack up their belongings steadily, hesitant to get back in the car for yet another long drive. The final commute down. Greyson brushes his teeth while Cameron folds his clothes and packs their stuff back into the car. Cameron approaches from behind, snaking an arm around Greyson’s waist and tucking his chin on his shoulder. They make eye contact in the mirror.

“I suggest we try to go as long as possible on the road so we can get to Kissimmee before dinner,” Cameron suggests. “My mom wants to take us all out to dinner.” Greyson spits the residual toothpaste and water from his mouth and rinses his toothbrush.

“She knows I’m coming?” Greyson asks, looking away from Cameron in the mirror.

“Yeah. I know better than to surprise her with a guest,” Cameron chuckles. “She’s very excited to meet you.”

“Really?” Greyson hums, packing his toothbrush back up and breaking free from Cameron’s hold. “What does she know?”

“Hm?”

“What does she know?” Greyson asks again. “Does she think I’m your friend? Does she know anything about how we met, or that we’re not, y’know, just friends…?”

“Are you asking if I talk to my mother about having sex with you?”

“Yes,” Greyson shrugs. “I wanna know if she’s gonna look at me weird or look at me like her son’s boyfriend or she’s gonna look at me like his football buddy or-”

“I don’t know how she’s going to look at you,” Cameron laughs, handing Greyson’s jacket over as they walk out the door. “I don’t know– she’s weird.”

“What did you tell her about me?” Greyson asks again. “Clearly you didn’t just say hey I’m bringing someone to thanksgiving with no explanation. What did you tell her?”

Cameron sits in the drivers seat. He looks pinker than he did in the bathroom. Blushy. Smiley.

“I don’t know…” Cameron shrugs. “I-I told her I was bringing a guy over for Thanksgiving, that he’s British and I didn’t want him to spend the holidays alone…”

“A guy or a friend?”

“Is there a difference?”

“ *A guy* implies something,” Greyson states, narrowing his eyes at Cameron. “ A friend is just as it sounds. A friend.”

“Are we friends?”

“Are we not friends?” Greyson presses. Cameron is quiet as they pull the car around toward the main office of the motel. “Cameron…”

“Give me your key so I can turn it in.”

“Cameron!”

Cameron opens his door and ducks out of the car before Greyson can press further. He sits back against his seat, aghast, shaking his head. Bringing *a guy* home. Not a friend. A guy. If Greyson said that to his mother– well, for starters, she would have a meltdown about having stranger germs in the house– but after that, she would immediately grill him about the said “guy”-- is he cute? Is he nice? Have they

kissed? Will they get married?

Greyson watches out the window as life carries on. Strangers walking their dog, or going into work, waking up and getting their morning brew, or shopping for their Thanksgiving dinner. Greyson's heart races at the sight of happy couples, holding hands, walking down the street with smiles on their faces and shoulder's bumping. He wonders how many people are "meeting the parents" for the first time this holiday season. He wonders how many of these couples will be put in painfully awkward positions like Greyson. He wonders if Cameron's parents were good – how they feel about a non-football player, about someone who big biker guys will look at in a bar and assume wears tennis skirts for fun, about a guy who likes their son as more than a friend.

Does he like Cameron more than a friend?

Cameron returns, sinking into the driver's seat. He clears his throat and puts the car in reverse, pulling out of the parking lot to get back on the highway.

"We were talking about-"

"Do you have any siblings?" Cameron asks out of nowhere to steer his way out of the conversation Greyson so desperately wanted answers to. Greyson shrinks in his seat, giving up. He's not getting his answers without a fight.

"Do you?"

"I asked first," Cameron hums, merging into an on-ramp for the southbound interstate.

Greyson huffs, looking down at his phone. He still hasn't told his Mum about where he's going, what he's doing. She would tell him not to. Too late.

"Yeah," Greyson exhales, smiling. "I'm the middle child."

"I can see it."

Greyson smacks his shoulder and rolls his eyes. He tries to think of a way to describe his siblings to someone with little knowledge of his life. It's amazing– they have been so close, to the point where Greyson is traveling cross-country with him, and yet they know practically nothing of each other.

“I have an older brother, Wesley. He’s four years older than me. He’s successful, I guess? Last I heard, he was in law school or something. We’re not very close, but… he’s my brother.” Cameron nods, side-eyeing Greyson before looking back at the road. “And I have a little sister. She’s 8. Her name is Phoebe.”

“Cute.”

“Yeah,” Greyson scoffs. “She’s… she’s a spitfire. Full of attitude. She is so much like my father it’s crazy. I don’t tell her that though. She has the mind of a 16 year old girl, and if I told her that, she would yell at me for saying she looks like a man.”

“Yeah, no. Never tell a girl they remind you of their dad,” Cameron laughs. “No matter how kindly intended.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Greyson sighs, smiling. “But it’s true. She’s sassy, and always has some quip. She is the funniest person I know, but also one of the most heartfelt and considerate.” Greyson traces his neck, still dawned with the necklace from her.

“I saw that last night. Is it from her?” Cameron asks, glancing at him again. Greyson nods.

“Birthday gift,” Greyson confirms. “It’s hideous, and I love it.”

“That’s always how it works,” Cameron says with a half smile. Greyson watches his face for a moment, twitching corners of his mouth, morphing into the direction of his happiness. “I…I have three sisters. One older. Two little. I know all three of them will be all over you when we get there…”

“No brothers?”

“None,” Cameron sighs. “Told you. Shared a room with my sister. It’s about as terrible as it sounds.”

“What was that like?”

“Well,” Cameron looks over at Greyson, raising an eyebrow. “Any time her friends were over, I wasn’t allowed in my own bedroom. Her stuff always happened to end up on my side of the room, and we argued about that to the point where my parents put a piece of tape down the middle of the room, all the way down to the door. No crossing the tape unless invited. She painted her side a hideous shade of purple. I painted mine lime green just to annoy her. Any time our

stuff creeped over the tape line, we had to give each other five bucks."

"I'm intrigued to see how this is set up."

"Oh, you will. Like I said, they will be very excited to harass you. I won't be surprised if Clarke drags you by the ear into our childhood bedroom to complain about me."

"Clarke and Cameron?" Greyson says. "Your parents must've hated you…"

"It gets worse," Cameron warns. "Clarke, Cameron, Callan and Calyx. My parents are Colton and Cassandra."

Greyson is silent for a long moment, aghast. He stares at Cameron, waiting for him to say it was a joke. Surely, no good parents would do that to themselves, or their children, for that matter. Not to mention: their poor teachers who probably had all four of the Cunningham children— that had to be confusing.

"You're kidding."

"Unfortunately, I'm not."

"That is the most Southern White Trash thing I have ever heard," Greyson laughs, falling back into his seat. "Clarke, Cameron, Callan and Calyx. How did they even come up with that? And your last name is a C too- oh my God."

"Yeah…" Cameron bit his cheek. "Our names got mixed up a lot."

"That is the worst thing I've ever heard."

Greyson almost entirely forgot about what Cameron said— about bringing a guy home . About being a guy, and not a friend. About the implications of it all. He tries not to panic. He tries not to fret.

Though, anxiety is in his nature.

They get all the way to Atlanta before they stop to stretch their legs. It's a miserable almost 8 hours, but when they finally get out of the car to have lunch, their bodies are flooded with relief to get out and stretch.

"We have… six hours to go," Cameron yawns, his arm drawn around Greyson's shoulder as they stroll through the streets of Atlanta,

looking for a good food stop. “So we will be in Kissimmee by, like, 8PM.”

“Now imagine if we woke up an hour earlier like I suggested-“

“I was not getting on the road for 5 in the morning,” Cameron said back with a wrinkle to his nose. “You’re lucky I was up by 6.”

“Well, on our way back up, I say we leave earlier to get a headstart on traffic.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cameron rolls his eyes. “It’s only Tuesday. What’s your rush? We’re enjoying the road trip, remember? It’s not about the destination-“

“I will hit you,” Greyson threatens, but reaches up to hold Cameron’s hand resting on his shoulder. Cameron is shocked by the act of intimacy, his core tightening and his shoulders tense. Greyson looks up at him, eyes tracing his jaw and mapping up to his eyes. “I feel insane. Knowing I just went all the way to Georgia with no planning.”

“You keep mentioning how crazy it is, and yet here you are,” Cameron says, trying to loosen his body again. Don’t let it show how nervous he is, how excited he is.

“Here I am.”

They end up ducking into a local place with brisket, cornbread, and baked mac and cheese, so who needs anything else? They sit at a bench together, sipping their drinks and snacking on cornbread as they wait for their food. Cameron keeps looking at Greyson, his hair a little crazy from air-drying today, and his face full of color. He doesn’t seem as pale, lifeless, and bored as he did yesterday morning when Cameron made the proposition. He doesn’t seem as lost and alone as he has for the past few months.

His hand sits on the table, and Cameron has never wanted to hold it more.

He does.

Reaching, his fingers drift across Greyson’s knuckles, and Greyson turns his hand over to welcome him. Their fingers lace together as if they’ve always done it. Greyson squeezes his fingers gently, and he says nothing of the interaction.

“So, what do your sisters know about me?” Greyson raises an eyebrow.

“This again?” Cameron groans.

“Technically, it’s a different question! You don’t tell your siblings the same thing you tell your parents…” Greyson digs his fork into the cornbread and pops it in his mouth with a cheeky smile. “Well?”

“I didn’t tell them.”

“What?”

“I didn’t tell them,” Cameron blushes. “What would I even say?”

“I don’t know! I figured they knew I was coming though!”

“My parents know. Why would I tell them? They’d just harass me about it for the next six months, I’m trying to get a few days of peace without them asking if you’re my boyfriend, or if I’m in love with you, or if we’re gonna get married. That’s what they did with Rowan. It’s always the same thing.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Am I?” Greyson raises an eyebrow. “What are you gonna tell them?” Cameron gets redder. “I’m curious.”

“You’re too much.”

Greyson just laughs, shaking his head. He thinks he’s having more fun pestering Cameron about his crush on him than he is with the rest of this trip. He has fun holding his hand and seeing Cameron get flustered by it, and he’s having fun being a prick and seeing Cameron still swoon, and *God* , it’s so fun to make fun of him about it all.

The waiter comes by to drop off more food, and they release one another’s hands. They spend as much time as possible enjoying the free movement, accessible bathroom and good food as possible before they get back on the road. Cameron, somehow, changes the topic again before Greyson can get him to confess his feelings, and Greyson gives up on getting an answer. Instead, he focuses his attention on planning the next few days.

“We get to Florida, hopefully stay the night in the hotel before having

to see my family, get a good night of sleep…" Cameron offers. Greyson nods. "Hit the ground running in the morning. Breakfast with Clarke and her fiancé? Are you up for that?"

"Your family, your agenda," Greyson shrugs.

"Okay. Breakfast with Clarke. We can explore Kissimmee a lot that day. My Mom already asked if I can pick up Callan and Calyx from school that afternoon, so we bring the girls to my parents house. You can meet everyone in a low-energy setting before Thursday. We can go up to Orlando and either go to Icon Park or Disney Springs or something on Wednesday night. Thursday morning, we have to be at the house for football and to help with set up. Family and dinner and all that stuff of course. Friday, we do whatever the hell you want, and Saturday we come home. Sound good?"

"Sounds… action packed," Greyson says with a small smile. "I'll take it."

"Never a dull moment in the Cunningham house," Cameron says with a small breath. "It'll be fun, though. They're a good group."

"Yeah?" Greyson tucks his hand on his chin. The check comes to their table, and Greyson grabs it before Cameron could. The man scowls. "What are they like? Like- y'know… you didn't tell me much about them. What's your parents like?"

Greyson pays and leaves a tip in cash— he was pretty impressed by how low the bill was— and they gather their things to set off again. Cameron holds the door open and they spill out onto the Atlanta streets again.

"What are my parents like…" Cameron hums to himself, considering his response. "Well… I dunno. They're… they're a good bunch. Never perfect, but always trying." Greyson nods slowly. "My Mom is just… one of the loveliest people you will ever meet. She is very hospitable. She needs to cook a feast every time everyone is home, or if we have someone with us. She goes out of her way to make everything perfect for guests. Her perfectionism can make her… tense…. But she tries."

Greyson can imagine her— a woman with Cameron's eyes and freckles, but a softer face and shorter stature. He imagines painted nails pinching his cheeks and asking how their drive was. He imagines a houseful of delicious smells rather than grocery store meals.

"And my Dad…" Cameron chuckles to himself.

Oh no.

“My dad is… something else,” Cameron raises his eyebrows at Greyson. “We-we talked about how intense your mom is. How she hovers.” Greyson nods. “My Dad… he helicopters. But only over me. He is also a perfectionist, but… but he’s also ambitious. And he wants the best out of us. It inspires me most of the time, but… but sometimes it can be a bit much. Sometimes you just want to feel good for passing that test, instead of a 100%, or you want to be happy about your accomplishments, rather than think about what you lost out on. He’s… he’s a tough one.”

“Is he…” Greyson doesn’t know the question he wants to ask, because there’s no good way to ask it. Is he homophobic? Is he a southern hick? Is he an asshole?

“No,” Cameron insists. “No, no. Not at all. He-He’s okay with-with a lot. He’s probably one of the few people in the world who knows I’m not straight. The five of them… they’re a safe place. They’re good,” Cameron smiles down at his shoes. “He’s really good. He just… expects the best from me, and it can read intensely.”

“Okay,” Greyson nods. Not straight. At least he knows it. “How did they react- to you, I mean?”

If Cameron planned on answering the question, he was interrupted by the sound of heavy construction and car horns as an accident cleared up from the middle lanes. Cameron doesn’t attempt to answer the question after they get past the noise, so Greyson makes the assumption that it was a conversation he wasn’t interested in having. A conversation for another day.

They arrive at the car again without stop or further interruption, and their drive once more resumes.

They get through the remaining six hours without any extra stops other than getting gas and stopping at a Starbucks drive-thru for something to drink. When they got off the highway in Orlando and started traveling down the local roads, Greyson’s nose practically pressed against the window in interest, trying to memorize it all– the funny McDonalds sign on Sand Lake Road, which makes it look like it says “ Mc-Do-Alds”. Greyson calls out everything he sees– the fireworks in the distance, and the amazing water fountains dancing to their music at the front of different hotels, and the busy intersections filled with music pumping from everyone’s cars. It’s a constant party.

“This is beautiful,” Greyson proclaims, staring up at the palm trees. “Did you know the palm trees aren’t native? I read somewhere that they’re transplants from-”

“South America and Asia?” Cameron finishes with him. Greyson looks back over his shoulder and smiles. “Yeah… kinda weird.”

“How do you not find this at least a little magical?” Greyson asks. “All–All the lights, and the sounds, and I feel like everywhere I look is so colorful and-”

“Welcome to the city,” Cameron murmurs, glancing at him as they stop at a redlight. Greyson loves that look in his eyes. Relaxed. Content. Amused. “I’m used to the magic by now, but… but I’m also used to seeing some gross things on these roads, too. Things you don’t need to know, otherwise you will run all the way back to London screaming.”

“I’m not from London, you prick,” Greyson scoffs. “I’m from Crawley.”

“Hey Siri?” Cameron announces over the sound of the bustling streets around them. His phone chirps through the speakers. “Where is Crawley, England?”

Greyson stares him down, confidence leaking down his spine, sitting up straighter, broader, knowing his geography of his home country.

“Crawley is a large town and borough in West Sussex, England. It is 28 miles south of London, 18 miles north of Brighton and Hove, and 32-”

Greyson shuts Cameron’s phone up before it could continue.

“For context, my dear,” Cameron murmurs, reaching over to gently rest his hand upon Greyson’s thigh. “We just drove over 1,000 miles. If we drove 28 miles from Providence, we would still be in Rhode Island. Hell, I’m from Kissimmee, but I still say I’m from Orlando half the time.” Cameron cracks a small smirk. “You’re from London.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Greyson determines, shaking his head. “I think I would know-”

“Yeah, yeah, argue with a wall,” Cameron waves him off. “Let me listen to the maps.”

The directions bring them to a hotel a little further from the city,

Cameron muttering something about how the device took him down some needless roads. He seemed exhausted and restless. Greyson frowns at his growing impatience, slowly reaching over to trace a hand over Cameron's shoulder. Cameron's face goes slack, and he sits straighter, giving Greyson more surface area to cover with his touch.

Finally, they pull into a parking lot of a quaint hotel– something not big-named or crazy busy, but still pretty looking. Cameron and Greyson get out of the car with small groans and stretches. They've arrived.

It feels real now.

Greyson's heart hammers in his throat, but he turns his face up to the clear night sky, soaking in the warmth of Florida fall. It's not frigid like it is in Providence. It's in the 60's, meaning Greyson's jacket was practically useless, and he was borderline sweating under it's weight. They shoulder their belongings and shuffle toward the entrance. Greyson props the door open for Cameron as they shuffle their way in.

"There's, like, five open kiosks. Want me to go-" Greyson began, but Cameron waves him off.

"I have connections."

"Connections?" Greyson repeats, raising an eyebrow. "What kind of-"

"Now, look at you! All big and strong on me…" a woman comes over, looking far-too-alert for it being nearly 10PM. "Hi Honey."

"Hi Auntie," Cameron leans down to hug the older-looking woman.

Greyson bites his cheek, sitting back on his heels. *Auntie* . They don't look all that similar– she is older, perhaps in her sixties, with a few wrinkles and peppery hair, and her nose shape is different, but she has the same smile as Cameron, and similar eyes. Auntie. Aunt. His parent's sister.

And so the meet and greet begins.

"Auntie, this is Greyson, he came down for the holiday with me. Greyson, this is my Aunt Alma," Cameron breaks free from her hold, swiping a hand over his face.

"Nice to meet you, sweetheart," the woman releases her nephew and

turns to face Greyson, sticking her hand out. “Welcome to Florida.”

“Thank you,” Greyson nods, shaking her hand.

“If I knew you were bringing someone, I would’ve set you up with a better room than just one bed and a pull out. I can change it if you’d like. We might be short on space, though-” Alma began to look over her shoulder at the employees at the desk, assisting a family checking in. “Hm… maybe-”

“We’ll make it work,” Cameron reassures. “If it’s really an issue, we’d just stay at Mom’s.”

“I suppose we’re nothing if not flexible,” Alma shrugs, looking up at her nephew again. “Okay, mister. I got your key on me already– here. You know your way. Do me a favor and pop by reception tomorrow to say hello to your cousins for me.”

“I will,” Cameron reassures. “We’re both exhausted, so we’re gonna go turn in.”

“Of course, of course-” she waves. “Love you, honey bunny. Go rest. See you.”

Cameron drags Greyson away and toward an elevator. Once secluded in the metal death-trap, Greyson looks up at Cameron aghast.

“You are so incredibly ridiculous,” Greyson states, an amazed and incredulous smile on his face. “Your aunt works at the hotel we’re staying at?”

“Correction, my Aunt *owns* the hotel we’re staying at. Free room and food? Hard to turn that up,” Cameron shrugs. “She’s nice.”

“She seems it. But she also knows that you and I are sharing a bed.”

“She thinks one of us will end up on the couch. It’s fine,” Cameron waves off. The elevator dings as they reach their floor, and the doors roll open. Greyson steps out first. “What? Are you scared of being seen with me? Having second thoughts about coming?”

“No- No! I just,” Greyson swallows the lump in his throat. “You’re confusing me.”

“I’m a confusing guy,” Cameron says, leading the way to their room, in the back corner of the hotel floor they were on.

Cameron scans the keycard and lets them in. They are greeted with the scent of fresh laundry, a clean-scented candle or incense, and a beautiful view through a massive window on the far wall. Greyson sets his belongings down on a table, shuffling toward the window. Beyond the pristine glass sits a colorful city in the distance, lit up with every color light, fireworks, and life. Below the hotel window sits a pond, draped by lights to make a romantic scenery of fireflies, frogs, and probably a couple alligators. The door clicks shut behind them, and Cameron sets the deadbolt lock in place.

“Are you upset?” Cameron asks.

“Upset?” Greyson repeats, looking over his shoulder. At the sight of those pretty soft eyes, dawned by tired bags and beautiful long eyelashes, Greyson felt his stomach hit the floor. Sinking, melting into himself.

He almost misses the day he couldn’t stand his stupid face– when looking at Cameron made him nauseous and angry, rather than soft and weak. It’s a strange feeling– like . Love . Whatever you call this weird crush he has. He’s never felt it before. Never felt anything like it.

“No,” Greyson murmurs, holding an arm out to take Cameron into. They slip around his neck, and Cameron settles his around Greyson’s waist, their bodies brushing together in their careful embrace. Greyson’s fingers wove through the roots of Cameron’s hair at the base of his head, and he scans his eyes in wonder, in hope, of something requited, something like love. Like like . “No. I’m… I’m really, really excited.”

“Good,” Cameron exhales, touching his forehead to Greyson’s. Both of their eyes close, and they share every breath like the air around them was limited. “Good.”

“Good,” Greyson mocks, nose brushing against his. “We can finally relax. No driving for a few days.”

“I know,” Cameron’s lips graze Greyson’s when he speaks. “And none of the guys are around to catch us.”

“Nobody’s here to catch us,” Greyson agrees, smiling as Cameron finally dips down to kiss him. Greyson’s grip tightens around his neck, pulling Cameron down and pressing his chest up into his partner’s. The boys both snicker to each other upon the first kiss.

And then, as the tension loosens, as they settle, they kiss a second time, a little more desperately, more excitedly. Like all their energy of the day has returned and been placed into their intimacy. Like their hands can't grab, press, pinch, hard enough. Like their mouths can't capture enough, move fast enough. Like their minds are running laps around the city as they run laps around each other.

Greyson's back presses against the mattress, and their clothes slowly scatter the floor around them, and their hearts are hammering in the direction of one another, like the poles between them pull only toward each other. Catching their breath for the briefest of moments, Cameron's arm holds him hovering over Greyson, a knee pressed into the mattress between his legs. Greyson looks up at him, his dark lashes emphasizing his dark eyes. Greyson slowly, steadily traces his fingers up Cameron's waist, over his ribcage. Cameron lets out a small puff of breath, pressing his hand through Greyson's hair. Out of his eyes. Away from his face. Giving Cameron the perfect view of a slightly shiny face, of golden warm skin despite his pale coloring, and earthy eyes that plant him in place.

"You are… so pretty," Cameron whispers before he can stop himself.

And that magnetic pull between their hearts, the curiosity of Greyson's fingers, the heavy breaths– they all stop. Greyson holds it all completely still.

Pretty.

Pretty.

Pretty .

Greyson's eyes flicker between Cameron's, green and glossy and beautiful. His cheeks, pink and warm. His mouth, pleasantly happy but not too toothy of a smile. His neck, where Greyson loves to bury his face. His chest, where Greyson likes to kiss. A little like *like* . A little like love. Greyson's heart stops, and it all feels… different.

Meeting his aunt, his sisters, his parents. Home for Thanksgiving with him. Their first holiday together. Sharing beds and drinks and Cameron's arm around his shoulders in random bars and the proud smile when Greyson does anything.

It's all different.

Greyson props himself up on his elbow and kisses him again. It's

unmistakable– the difference. Greyson knew it before he kissed him. Cameron felt it the moment their lips touched. It feels different because it is different. They are different.

Cameron brought a guy home for the holidays– not a friend. A guy. Someone to introduce to the family. Someone to show off. Someone he is drawn to like some scientific force rather than some hopeful friendship inspired attention.

Greyson and Cameron aren't just here, together. They're together here.

Sparks fly. Butterflies burst in their bellies. Every hardship, every anxiety, it melts away. Greyson doesn't care about the truth of the party– if something happened to Cameron or if he was really just drunkenly interested in Allie– and he doesn't care if Cameron's friends are assholes, and he doesn't care if Cameron is the spitting image of what Greyson is supposed to hate. He doesn't care. Not one bit.

He's on cloud nine.

Chapter End Notes

There's been a shift....

Anyways. Shorter chapter but... hmm. Something is brewing. Something is on the horizon :))))

Happy Monday, losers. If I don't post before thursday: happy thanksgiving. I'm thankful for u idiots who love sotd as much as i do.

-hayl [@ hayloftown on twt]

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Bad habits

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson struggled to go to sleep that night, regardless of how tired he was, because all that was on his mind was the intensity of that kiss, that moment. The realization has hit him, and he lies awake thinking about it.

It's midnight, and Cameron is asleep on his chest. Prior to knowing him, Greyson always thought Cameron would be the "big spoon" type, always thought he would be the big-macho-man that his friends made him out to be. He was too big and tough to be the type to snuggle into someone else. Alas— here he was. Greyson is painfully adoring every soft breath that blusters against Greyson's bare chest. He enjoys twirling Cameron's hair, and watching him sleep, and the warmth he brings.

At 2:00AM, Cameron rolls away from him. Turn in the other direction, curled small. His back curves slightly, his spine and his muscles prominent under his skin. Greyson couldn't help but trickle over his back, laying on his side to examine every inch of perfect skin. Untattered.

At 2:45, Greyson finally fell asleep.

Cameron wakes early— around 5AM. Laid beside him is Greyson, his eyes closed and his chin tucked toward his chest, blankets wound around him. His lips part with passing breaths, and he moves a lot in his sleep, Cameron notices.

He leaves to use the hotel gym— stops at reception to say hi to his cousins as requested by Aunt Alma, too. They make brief small talk at the counter before he parts ways to get some energy flowing. The hotel gym isn't all that fantastic— it's a little small, and it doesn't have his usual equipment, but he makes it work and returns to the room around 6:30 to shower. Greyson is still asleep.

Greyson wakes around 7 to the sound of the shower running and a

cold spot in the bed beside him. He tosses and turns in hopes of getting comfortable enough to go back to sleep, but it doesn't work. He presses himself upright and rubs his eyes, yawning.

How long has Cameron been out of bed?

It's barely a minute before the water is off and he's coming out of the bathroom, towel hung from his hips and hair dripping down his neck.

"Morning," Cameron says, a little too chipper for the early hour. Greyson mumbles something unintelligible and rests his head against his knees. "Sleep okay?" Greyson just makes a noise. "Alrighty then."

Cameron gets dressed as Greyson steadily wakes up— Cameron also brews something in the Keurig in a paper cup, setting the hot beverage on Greyson's bedside table.

"Get some coffee in you and get dressed," Cameron hums, pressing a kiss to the top of Greyson's head. It didn't feel very "casual hookup" of him. None of this does.

He takes the cup and sips it down, sitting back against the bed frame and watching Cameron pull on a pair of jeans and button them. He has a blank stare on his face, too tired to make expressions fully.

"You look… miserable," Cameron says, glancing in the reflection of the mirror to make eye contact with him. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah," Greyson mumbles, blinking a few times. "Yeah. I'm good."

Cameron tugs on a crewneck sweatshirt and turns, sinking onto the bed in front of Greyson. A hand passes over Greyson's face gently, tracing every hint of exhaustion, and thumbing at the corner of his mouth.

"If you wanna sleep some more, I don't mind hanging out with Clarke on my own."

"No, I'm good," Greyson insists, sitting up straighter. "I wanna meet her."

"Are you sure? I really don't mind. We had a long few days…" Cameron hums.

"I'm sure," Greyson feigns a smile and tries to look more alert. "It'll be fine. Let me finish my coffee."

“Okay, then brush your teeth. Your breath stinks,” Cameron says, pecking his lips and pulling away to resume his “get ready” process.

Greyson tries to chug his coffee quickly and uses it as a boost of energy to get up. When he pulls himself from bed, he rifles through his bag for clothes, wondering what an adequate “meeting the family of the guy you’re hooking up with and probably are in love with” outfit would be. Is there such a thing?

Eventually, he gives up on making a good impression and just puts something clean on, ruffling his hair in the mirror as he brushes his teeth. Cameron slides in behind him, grabbing some of the jewelry that sat on the counter— a few silver rings Greyson has never seen him wear and a chain necklace. Cameron runs a comb through his hair, only to mess it all up with his hands, the damp hair somehow filled with volume and pretty waves. It’s annoying how easily he can be perfect.

“So, the café isn’t that far, and I don’t like to drive more than I have to with gas emissions and all that, so… are you up for taking a stroll through town?” Cameron offers, smoothing out his eyebrows in the mirror with a small furrow to them.

“I could stretch my legs,” Greyson agrees between spits of toothpaste. “How long of a walk?”

“Like, five minutes down the road. Not bad at all.”

He rinses his mouth clean and spits one last time, standing up straight and observing their reflection– their bodies partnered, side by side, like they were puzzled together by the grace of God. God has never treated Greyson kindly– he’s not sure why that would change now.

They set off on foot for this café that Cameron spoke of– Greyson couldn’t help but feel his nerves bubble with every step closer to Cameron’s older sister. He may not get along with him, but Greyson has a level of respect for his older brother, loves his older sibling enough, to give a damn about what he thinks. It’s why Wes’s hatred of him bothers Greyson so much. What if Clarke doesn’t like him? Cameron and Clarke shared a room as kids– they are two halves of the same whole. They are as close as siblings can get, Greyson imagines. Her perception of him is more important than anything.

Their knuckles brush as they both reach for the door handle to the café. Cameron blushes while Greyson yanks away, letting the former open it for the both of them. They slide in, and Cameron scans the

room briefly before evidently making eye contact with someone and setting off. Greyson swallows his nerves and follows.

“Hey stranger,” the girl hops to her feet and pulls Cameron into a crushing hug, groaning slightly as she jostled Cameron around playfully. Cameron held on tight for the wild ride, letting her mess with his hair and squeeze tight. “Oh, I missed you…”

“Well, maybe if you were in Kissimmee this summer, you wouldn’t miss me as much,” Cameron teases, pulling away and gradually trying to fix his hair in the window reflection. “Clarke, this is Greyson. Greyson, my older sister Clarke.”

“Your favorite sister,” Clarke corrects, sticking her hand out to shake Greyson’s. He offers a shy smile, and his stomach flips as he takes it. He forgot about that part of meeting people– meeting the family. Shaking hands. “Didn’t know he was bringing a guy home this year… Hm.” She looks him over with interest. Before she could continue, Cameron spoke up.

A guy . She thinks it too.

“Ah, no. Callie is my favorite. Always will be,” Cameron smirks, patting her shoulder and sliding into the booth, offering Greyson the spot beside him. He takes it, nervously wiping his hands on his pantlegs. “Hubby not here for the holiday?” Clarke tsks and shakes her head.

“Where were you this summer?” Greyson asks in an effort to start friendly conversation. Clarke’s eyes double in size as she looks at Greyson, mouth falling agape and staring at him.

“You have an accent!” She gasps, looking at Cameron. “You landed a British guy? Mister Cameron Cunningham, I am impressed-”

“Shut up, Clarke,” Cameron groans, rolling his eyes. He didn’t deny it . Greyson wants to vomit. He wants to scream. “She was abroad. She decided to take a summer term in Europe.”

“I spent June in Paris, July in Amsterdam, and August in Germany. Can you blame me?” she cracks a smile. “Let the boy speak, Cameron. I wanna hear his pretty voice again. Go on. Speak.”

“He’s not a dog,” Cameron huffs. “You have to ask people questions if you want answers.”

“Fine,” she sits back in her seat, staring Greyson down intently.

Greyson shifts, but tries to keep his smile on his face. Cameron either saw through it, or really missed him with their few inches of space between them, because he reaches over and rests a hand on Greyson’s thigh, giving a gentle squeeze. It felt more comforting than it should.

“Where are you from?”

“England,” Greyson answers easily. “About 30 miles south of London.”

“Oh, so *now* you’re from London,” Cameron rolls his eyes. “You are the worst.”

“I’m not from London,” Greyson argues, looking between the siblings. “I’m thirty miles out of the city. That’s– That’s like, I don’t know– “

“That’s, like, from here to the east coast,” Clarke furrows her eyebrows. Holy shit she looks like Cameron. “You think that’s close to London? Oh, honey– how did you get into an Ivy League with those geography skills…”

“Hey!” Cameron exclaims.

Greyson, in their moment of bickering, has time to identify how similar they appear. Both with sandy blond hair, though, hers is lighter with highlights put in both professionally and through sun bleaching. Their eyes, eyebrows, and mouth are identical. Face shape and cheekbones, too. Greyson thinks the only difference is their nose, hers a little wider, and pierced with a little gold hoop. They are both unmistakably siblings, and more so, completely gorgeous.

Their lips quirk up into a lopsided smile the same way, and their inflections are the same, and they have the same mannerisms in every damn way– it’s jarring to see someone so similar to Cameron. Greyson was under the impression that he was truly one of a kind.

“Are you all like this?” Greyson asks, forgetting to filter himself. The siblings stop bickering long enough to look at him again with shared confused expressions. Identical expressions. Mirror images of one another.

“Like what?” Clarke raises an eyebrow.

“…Identical?” Greyson says, looking between them again, becoming greatly unsettled by their similar nature. They both recoil and share a

look with one another and look back at him, again, with the same face, equally as confused and surprised. “You guys are literally the same person.”

“No we’re not,” Cameron scowls. “Ew. Ew! No- no, Greyson, she is the kind of person to leave her hair on the wall after showering, and I-”

“You’re the kind of guy who used the same hair brush your entire teenage years!” Clarke argues back. “Greyson, I am *appalled* . We only just met and this is quite possibly the meanest thing I have ever heard.”

“What do you mean ?” Greyson scoffs, amazed as the siblings both scramble for their defenses. “You have the same face. The same voice. You guys are like clones…”

“Am not! I am nothing like her,” Cameron states, pointing at his sister. “She doesn’t clean her hair out of the shower. She picks her teeth at the table. She bit her nails until she was, like, 15.”

“At least I didn’t sleep with my sister’s entire friends group in high school,” Clarke snips.

“I did not!” Cameron defends, looking between the two of them. “But even if I did – at least I could find someone to sleep with me. Where’s your fiance, huh?”

“He’s out of town!”

“Just like how your high school boyfriend went to another school?”

“Ladies, ladies,” Greyson intervenes, setting an arm across Cameron. “I didn’t mean to start a fight. I figured you were… I don’t know. Nevermind. Let’s just… order coffee.”

“ *Look like my sister* . I can’t believe you,” Cameron huffs.

“If I never get compared to you again, it will be too soon,” Clarke mutters back, but has a small smile on her face as she buries her nose into the menu.

They drive around central Florida looking for something to do that day while they wait for Cameron’s younger sisters to get out of school. They explore Orlando Square, and they get lunch in the food court– somewhere Cameron insists has the best Mexican. Greyson won’t

argue– it was pretty good. They drive aimlessly down the streets in search of something to kill their time until 2:00 PM rolls around. It comes faster than anticipated.

They sit in the pick up loop of a high school on the east end of Kissimmee. Cameron is texting his Mom, and Greyson is flicking through songs on the radio, unable to pick. He glances over, watching Cameron's thumbs trill at lightning speed.

"Do you really not see it?" Greyson asks. "Between you and Clarke?"

Cameron stops suddenly.

"Hm?"

"Like, there's no way you don't see how similar you are, right?"

"...I guess not," Cameron shrugs ,"I never really saw it like that. No one ever said anything, so I never noticed."

"That's… that's crazy, you know that? Like… it's like having an identical twin and not realizing you look similar," Greyson insists.

"Well, she's not my twin-" Cameron reminds. "We're, like, two years apart. And she is an annoyance."

"You love her."

"Never said I didn't," Cameron says, looking up at Greyson and smiling. "She annoys me more than anyone ever could. I want to tear my hair out when she tells embarrassing stories, and I hate being her little accessory, but… I love her. I love her more than almost anyone."

"Not more than Callie, though," Greyson mentions, recalling the favorite sibling conversation earlier.

"You'll meet her and you'll love her more, too," Cameron insists, peering over Greyson's shoulder. "Speaking of…"

Greyson cranes his head to look behind him, seeing a pair of girls stroll in the direction of the pick-up loop with their bags slung over their shoulders, scanning the cars. His jaw drops, and he looks at Cameron again.

"You're like the creepy twins from the shining! All four of you!"

"You're kidding," Cameron scoffs, shaking his head. "I'll let you get

away with Clarke. But *Callan* ? She's a spitting image of our Dad-"

Greyson can't tell which of the girls is Callan, because the two look confusingly similar. They are both the same height, with similar features to all their other siblings, and matching smiles. Greyson understands now– the weird "C" cult. C doesn't stand for Cunningham, or any of their first names. It stands for fucking *Creepy* .

Finally, one of the girls points out Cameron's car, and they rush forward to jump in. One circles around to lunge into the backseat behind Cameron. The other, upon sight of someone in the front seat (that someone being Greyson), sulks into the backseat, too.

"You're home!" One of them exclaims, wrapping her arms around Cameron's shoulders from behind and craning around the headrest to kiss his cheek. "Mom said you might not come home! You came!"

"I made it work," Cameron says with a blushy smile, reaching behind him to give an awkward attempt at a hug from his seat. Both girls close their doors, and the other one pushes their sister back to get in, too. "Callan! Be nice!"

"Shut up, where's my souvenir?" Callan sits on the center console and leans forward. "I want a souvenir."

"You get a gift at Christmas, idiot," Cameron says, knocking her with his elbow to push her into the back. She only jostles and stays put. "Put on your seatbelt."

"Who's this? Oh! You brought a boy!" Callan wriggles her eyebrows at Greyson, still not moving. "You know, he brought a guy home last Thanksgiving too– he's not very good at this whole keeping guys thing-"

"Cal, this is Greyson," Cameron sighs. "He is Rowan's roommate. We're just friends with Rowan. Always have been."

"Don't believe a word he says. He's a sleuth," Callan insists. "An absolute man-whore."

"Callan," Cameron says again, this time more stiff. "Sit down ."

"I am sitting."

"In your seat!" Cameron argues. The second sister grabs Callan by the arm and yanks her back into their respective row. Callan drops into

her spot and buckles in. “ This is why Callie is my favorite.”

“Does Clarke know this?” Callan asks.

“Clarke agreed with me,” Cameron shot back, looking over his shoulder. “Greyson, you’ve now met the worst sibling, Callan. The best sibling is the angel sitting behind me.”

“I’m Calyx,” the youngest introduces, smiling with a small wave. “Nice to meet you.”

“Greyson,” Greyson says back, relieved to be met with a touchless-gesture. “Okay. I’ve met all the sisters? No more?” Greyson looks up at Cameron hopefully.

“That’s all of them,” Cameron concludes. “Alright, heathens. I’m taking you home.”

Greyson is relieved for the conversation to be moved off of him and onto Cameron– the sisters grill him with question after question about the semester thus far– how’s Rowan? What’s going on with football? The fraternity? How are his grades? Does he still hate his economics professor?

“Your brother is captain of the football team,” Greyson comments. Cameron smacks his knee with a frown.

“Really?” Calyx shot upright. “That’s awesome! I thought those meatheads took the position from you!”

“They did-” Cameron glances at Greyson and sighs. “Meatheads got into some trouble, so I got promoted.”

“What kind of trouble?” Callan asks, her interest suddenly piqued. “Are you in trouble? Oh- what did you do? Do tell.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Cameron argues. “Shut up. Don’t tell Dad.”

“Why not?” Calyx frowns. “That’s so exciting! He would be so happy for you.”

“Just, don’t,” Cameron pleads. “Let me tell him, at least.”

“Oh, you just love getting all the glory and fame,” Callan rolls her eyes. “Aren’t you tired or being so good and perfect all the time?”

“I’m not -”

“Ivy-League school, full ride scholarship, top athlete in the state of Florida, now a football captain at said Ivy League. Not to mention the cool British boyfriend and-”

“ *Callan* ,” Cameron says sharply. “Shut up. Please.”

“I’m not his boyfriend,” Greyson finally says.

Days. He’s been thinking about it for days. He’s not Cameron’s boyfriend. Not his partner. Not his lover or his company to family thanksgiving as his future spouse. He is Cameron’s hookup. He’s Cameron’s outlet to misbehave when he’s tired of being perfect all the time. He’s the excuse to not be at parties, and he’s the arms Cameron likes to sleep in, and he’s the mouth Cameron likes to kiss. He’s not his boyfriend, though.

Cameron’s aunt. His older sister. His little sisters. How many of them have to imply it before Cameron cracks, too? How does Cameron do it? How does he let them presume their relationship status and not panic ? Why does Cameron let them all say what isn’t true?

“And I’m not his little sister,” Callan jokes.

“Cal,” Cameron murmurs.

“Okay, riddle me this. If you’re not his boyfriend, why are you here?” Callan questions. Cameron rounds the corner into a beautiful neighborhood– a fucking gated community. It makes Greyson nauseous. “Better yet– you’re here, and he didn’t tell us about you. At least with Rowan, he talked about his best friend for a few years, told us about him, we spoke on the phone– meanwhile, dear Cameron over here seems like he’s shaking in his boots just sitting here with you.” Greyson glances at Cameron, his knuckles white against the steering wheel and his jaw tense. Greyson tries to play it off. Tries to smile it off.

“Y’know, impulsive college kids,” Greyson shrugs, looking over his shoulder. “Sometimes we make stupid decisions for the fun of it. I’ve never been to Florida before. Here I am.”

“Here you are.”

It’s like she’s challenging him. It’s like Callan wants Greyson to crack under the pressure of her stare– like she knows something he doesn’t. It’s incredibly intimidating. If he was worried about what Clarke thought– the girl so identical to her brother, so funny, light hearted,

sweet, yet awkward as her little brother, Greyson had to be terrified of Callan. Clarke doesn't speak the obvious. She doesn't state her every thought. Callan does. She makes direct eye contact and calls it as she sees it. She notices everything and she's not quiet about it.

They pull into a long driveway, and the car turns off. Before the debate can continue, both girls lunge out of the car and up the stairs to the house, racing toward the bathroom– both exclaiming that they need to pee more.

"Are they always like that?" Greyson asks. Cameron glances over at Greyson, biting his cheek, and sighs, stepping out of the car.

The fuck was that about?

Greyson follows him in.

Upon walking through the front door, Greyson is aghast to find the wonderland of a rich white suburban family. His childhood self would despise Cameron for this. Part of his adult self is a little jealous, too.

The ceilings seem to go up forever. There's this fantastical chandelier overhead in the entryway, gold structure to the lighting. The walls are the brightest white Greyson has ever seen– how they are so untouched and unscuffed, Greyson isn't sure. His house back home is dented and demolished by Dad's wheelchair scraping the walls and bumping into the fridge as he tries to fit through tight spaces. There's a constant layer of dust from Mum not having time to clean, and a scent of cleaning supplies.

Cameron's house, though… it's like a Pinterest-Mom threw up inside it.

There's a cute little bench, and a rack for shoes. Cameron and Greyson kick theirs aside, and Greyson folds his arms around himself, curious and terrified. There's this grand rounded staircase reaching the second floor, the stairs white and the railing a sturdy steel. They don't go upstairs– just carry forward.

To the left of the entryway is a beautiful archway leading to a massive living room– sectionals, and arm chairs, and the biggest TV Greyson has ever seen. There's a bust sitting on one of the tables under a floor-to-ceiling window. The mantle of the fireplace is covered in photos. Greyson inches forward to study them. Each of the girls have their own pictures posted– a photo of Clarke on a horse, and a photo of Callan playing lacrosse, and Calyx with a violin tucked under her chin.

There's family photos of the family of six, and Christ, even Cameron's parents are beautiful. All four of the children look identical to their mother, though Greyson will confess that Callan does look slightly more like their father– just the nose, and maybe her eyebrows.

Front and center, though, in a slightly larger picture frame, is Cameron. It's an action shot– a football in his hand, about to be thrown. It looks like a professional shot for ESPN.

Greyson continues looking around– the house is a big open concept, the living room flowing into the kitchen which flows into the dining room, all three leading back to the entryway. The kitchen is also a grand-white-wonderland, with marble countertops, white cabinets, suede bar stools, and gold fixtures. It looks like a cleaning lady came through just a few moments prior. It smells clean, too. Not a dish in the sink. The dishwasher was running. There's an artistic bowl of apples in the middle of the island.

The far wall toward the dining room is what really grabs Greyson's attention– a big blown up photo of each of the children, framing the picture in the middle of a family portrait– clearly all taken on the same family picture day. They're in coordinating photos, and they're surrounded by golden leaves that certainly didn't fall in Florida– the pictures must've been taken further up north. All of them look like supermodels– they're dressed beautifully, and they have the most perfect smiles, and their hair is done. Clarke's hair is curled and flawless, and Callan is dressed in this beautiful but simple fall dress, and Calyx looks adorable, clearly depicted as the youngest, as the angel child– the photo has to be a few years old, because both of the younger girls have braces, but their teeth look straight beneath them.

"You're like a creepy white family from a Jordan Peele movie," Greyson whispers as Cameron comes up to stand behind him. "How are you all so… perfect?"

"Yeah," Cameron scoffs. "Perfect. Sure." Cameron inches closer, shoulder to shoulder with Greyson and examining the image. "The morning of this photo shoot, I got into a fight with my mother because I didn't want them to play with my hair. It sent me into this… this sensory meltdown, and I was miserable." Greyson's gaze flickers to Cameron's photo– you could never tell based on his smile, based on his beautiful appearance, like the sun shone on him alone. "Clarke got into a fight with Callan that ended in Callan's pants ripping, and Clarke having scratch marks down her arms." That explains the dress and the long sleeves. "Callie had a panic attack that morning, because

she's scared of the woods, and we for some reason went up to the New Hampshire mountains for family pictures. And my parents got into the biggest fight in their entire marriage because my Dad thought it was stupid, and my Mom spent a lot of money on these pictures."

"Damn," Greyson exhales. "Definitely the creepy white family."

"Yep."

Greyson honestly enjoyed much of his childhood, despite it all. He loved rolling around in Dad's lap in the wheelchair. And he and Wesley were really close– they had to be friends, otherwise they would have no one. Mum was so gentle with them all. Mum was so forgiving, so understanding. They didn't have a lot of money– it all went to medical bills– but they had a lot of fun. As much fun as they could, at least.

"I love my family. A lot," Cameron whispers. "But they're a lot. Callan is a lot. Clarke is a lot. My parents…"

"A lot," Greyson presumes. Cameron nods. "Explains why you are… the way you are."

"What does that mean?"

Greyson shrugs.

"You sticking around?" Calyx says, suddenly behind them. They both jump, whirling around to face her. Calyx is sitting at the counter, eating a bowl of fruit salad with her legs crossed. "Or are you leaving before Mom gets home?"

"We're gonna head out," Cameron states. Greyson looks up at him, nodding slowly. "But I wanted to make sure I saw my favorite girl and gave her a proper hug first."

"I better be the favorite," Calyx says with a half smile, standing and letting her brother take her into a big bear hug. Calyx squeezed him around the shoulders, stood on her toes to reach his height. "I missed you."

"Missed you too, kid," Cameron hums. "Be good. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Love you. See you tomorrow."

They wait long enough for Callan to return for a quick hug, too, before leaving– Calyx has to tackle her and put a hand over her mouth to make her shut up long enough to let the boys escape. Cameron practically drags Greyson by the wrist out of the house and toward the car.

“Callan is quite something,” Greyson says as he settles into the car, buckling his seatbelt.

“I mean, she’s not too far off-” Cameron shrugs, not making eye contact as he starts the car and checks his mirrors. “She says what she sees.”

“And what she sees isn’t always right,” Greyson reminds, watching Cameron closely. The man settles against his seat for a moment, taking a breath, and putting the car in reverse. “Right?”

“What do you want to do this afternoon?”

“Why are you changing the subject?” Greyson interrogates. Cameron ignores him. “Cameron.”

“We could do Disney Springs. They tend to do cute things for the holidays-”

“Cameron, just- stop .” Greyson turns to face him, scowling. “Why are you acting like this?”

“Acting like what?” Cameron swallows nervously, looking around despite them driving on some dead silent neighborhood road. “I’m being normal.”

“Am I coming to Thanksgiving as your boyfriend?”

“Why are we talking about this?”

“Because you don’t want to! And it’s weird!” Greyson exclaims finally. “It’s-It’s *weird* , Cameron! Every time I ask what you told them about me, and-and the way you don’t correct anyone who assumes we’re dating, and-and you just kind of float over the topic every time I bring it up? We never talked about this. I agreed to come, yes, but I didn’t agree to-to be seen as the next boyfriend on your roster, or-or to be looked at like one of your frat-prostitutes.”

“Frat prostitutes?” Cameron scoffs.

“You know it’s bad when your own sisters call you a man-whore, Cameron,” Greyson states. “How many people have you brought home for family holidays? How many times have you done this weird routine where-where you just kinda trap someone in with your freaky family that all looks identical and your rich-bitch wonderland of a house-”

“Excuse me?” Cameron recoils. “I like to think we’re not that weird. Maybe a little fake, but I think most families put on a front for others-”

“Cameron,” Greyson interrupts. “I grew up in a small house in a small town where all I had was my brother, my dying father, and my mother who could barely afford Christmas gifts. I-I grew up in this little house where my father could barely fit through the doorways in his wheelchair, and all the trim is chipped because of it, and-and where the walls are marked with our height, and-and… and we couldn’t leave because no where in town was accessible for im and we were too scared of bringing home a cold– I don’t know. I didn't grow up like this. I didn’t have this. My family was real.”

“And mine isn’t?” Cameron asks. “Pull your head out of your ass, Greyson. For fucks sake…” He runs a hand over his face, shaking his head. “Just… shut up. Do me a favor and stop talking for… for ten minutes.”

“You first.”

“Gladly.”

The two descend into silence on the car ride back to the hotel– when they arrive, Greyson follows behind him with his arms crossed and his jaw clenched. He’s annoyed. What was Cameron thinking– just… springing this on him? Why would he even remotely think that this is okay?

It’s all hitting him now. The spontaneous trip. The longing looks. The sex in random hotels. The hand holding. The drinks. The kiss last night. It all meant something. Not just to Greyson, but to Cameron too. It’s all been meaning something, and neither one of them ever called it out. Neither of them will admit it. It’s all meaning something and it fucking terrifies him.

Greyson sits down at the couch by the window, legs pulled up with him and his eyes trained on the cloudy Florida sky. Cameron goes into the bathroom, just to get a little space from Greyson in this tiny ass

room. They're unavoidable. They can't ignore one another for long when they are stuck in the same space.

It's a pull out couch, isn't it?

When Cameron comes back out, his face is freshly washed, and his hair is slightly damp form running wet fingers through it. Cameron sits on the edge of the bed and stares at Greyson, who refuses to look back.

"Greyson."

Greyson stays silent. He wanted 10 minutes of silence– what's a little longer?

"Greyson, can we just… talk? Calmly?"

"No."

"Why not?" Cameron asks. Greyson doesn't respond. "Greyson."

He stands and moves to Greyson's side, settling on the couch with him. Greyson adjusts to put an extra few centimeters between them. Cameron's shoulders drop, and he follows Greyson's gaze out the window. They sit there in silence for a long few moments.

"I didn't say anything because I didn't know what to say."

Greyson's stomach flips. His jaw tightens, and he tries his hardest to not look back at him. He's mad. He's angry. He's annoyed. He hates miscommunication.

"It's not that I… I am purposely deceiving people. I'm not trying to… to pressure you into a relationship, or make people believe we're in one. I just… I don't know what else I'm supposed to say. I don't know how to be forthright like you are, or like Callan is."

Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck off and fuck you. Shut up. Stop making me feel bad for you.

"I have this really bad habit of following the crowd. I-I have a horrible time thinking for myself, making my own decisions without outside input. It's why I never tried to get captain for the team. It's why I joined a frat. It's why I stuck with my old friends for too long. I do as told and I have no sense of boundaries, and it ends up with people making assumptions of me, and I just… go with it."

“And it becomes my problem.”

“Yes,” Cameron exhales, reaching over to place a hand on Greyson’s folded ones. Greyson tenses, but Cameron doesn’t flinch away. “I’m sorry I didn’t correct anyone. And I’m sorry I haven’t been more forthright.”

“Did you tell your family I’m your boyfriend?” Greyson asks explicitly, finally looking over his shoulder at him.

“No.” He answers quick. He answers honestly. “I-I really didn’t tell my sisters anything. And-and I told my parents you were a guy. I told them you were a friend of mine and Rowan's.” Greyson nods slowly.

“What else?’

“Well…” Cameron looks away. Greyson turns over his hand and pulls on Cameron’s, forcing Cameron’s eyes back up. Greyson wants truth. More importantly, he wants to make sure Cameron isn’t avoiding it. “I… I didn’t tell them much else. But… but they asked. They asked if I liked you.”

“And you said?”

No. He said no. They’re friends with benefits at best.

“I said yes,” Cameron exhales. Greyson’s stomach drops. “I told them… I’m interested in you. But I didn’t think anything would happen, because… because I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

Not a good idea. Greyson could throw up.

“But-but I said this while I still wasn’t sure if you were coming, before I even thought about inviting you. I was just… I was telling them about school. My Dad was asking about friends, and you came up, and new names always get them so excited-”

“Why is it a bad idea?”

“What?”

Greyson shouldn’t have asked that.

“Why is it a bad idea?” Greyson repeats. Cameron’s jaw trembles. He’s scared. He’s nervous. He’s shifting in his seat, and his hands fidget, and he has a hard time looking in any one place. Greyson slowly takes Cameron’s hand and holds it in his, lacing their fingers together,

holding him hostage. “Why… is it a bad idea?”

“It was a bad idea-”

Was. Was. Past tense. Was.

“It was a bad idea, because at the time-” *at the time* . Greyson watches Cameron intently. “I was friends with people who… who would hurt you. Who would hurt me… if they knew. People who did hurt us. And I was scared.” Greyson nods. “And it was a bad idea, because there’s this common idea that… that my type of people don’t overlap with… with this.”

“Sleeping with guys?”

“Dating anyone who isn’t a pretty blond sorority girl.” He looks up at Greyson again. “And I’m… I’m still scared of it. I don’t know how people will react. I don’t know how everything would go. I just… I want to be safe. And I want you to be safe. But I want to be happy too.”

“Do… do I make you happy?”

No .

“Happier than I’ve ever been.”

Oh .

His chest rises and falls in slow motion. Greyson thinks there's not enough air to breathe in that will replace the breath that just left him. Like the worst possible gut punch, like his heart was wrenched in two, and his body didn’t know how to recover. This feeling aches. Is this supposed to ache?

Cameron looks down again at their hands, laced together, his fingers twitching against Greyson’s.

Greyson can’t breathe. He can’t control himself at all. Like he was hardwired to act without thought, his body presses him forward, and he takes Cameron’s face into his hands– releasing his hand, Greyson’s fingers cup Cameron’s jaw so gently, and he takes a kiss that is rightfully his. At first, Cameron is still, but only a moment later is his hands on Greyson’s waist, pulling Greyson into his lap. Greyson goes for a second kiss. Like the fourth of July, sparks are flying, fireworks overhead. Greyson’s thumbs glide along his scruffy cheeks, and their

noses brush against one another's, and Cameron breathes a full breath back into Greyson’s lungs.

Their lips part for barely a moment, their lungs filling and their hearts warmed. They connect again, and Cameron tugs Greyson closer, tighter, firmer. Holding on for dear life. Legs clench around Cameron’s body, and Greyson presses a kiss to the corner of Cameron’s mouth, to his cheek, to his jaw, at the base of his ear.

“I’m still mad at you,” Greyson whispers.

“You always are. I’d expect nothing less,” Cameron exhales, hands squeezing Greyson’s waist.

“Am I your boyfriend?”

“I don’t call the shots in this,” Cameron scoffs breathily. Greyson leaves another kiss at his jaw.

“That’s not true. If there’s anything you get control over, it’s this.” Greyson’s fingers trace down his throat, down to his collar. “I ask again: am I your boyfriend?”

“God I fucking hope so.”

Chapter End Notes

> This was not editted at ALL but i still love it very much so do not mention any spelling errors thx besties.
>
> Happy Monday, folks. New chapter for u
> Hayl (hayloftown on twt)

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Butterflies in his belly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

]

Boyfriend .

Boyfriend. A Guy. Greyson is a guy Cameron brought home for Thanksgiving. A boyfriend.

Thursday morning he wakes with the weight of his boyfriend on his chest. It feels weird to think of him like that, even if its all he's thought about for the past eighteen hours since they made it official. Greyson has spent all 18 hours thinking of him, noticing him, dreaming about him. They have spent forever together in the past few days and yet Greyson only keeps finding more to discover.

His fingers pave the way through Cameron's hair. It's a beautiful feeling— silky waves and frizzy curls that have been broken up since his last shower. His hair is so soft and thick, and Greyson could play with it forever.

Similarly, the way he sleeps is so lovely. His lips parted with passing breaths, and his body is warm like an oven on a cold winter day, and his hands twitch against Greyson when he starts to wake. He has restless legs— they cricket together as he stirs, and his back arches as he does a morning stretch paired with a yawn.

Greyson breathes in a grateful breath.

"Morning," Greyson whispers into his head. Cameron mumbles something unintelligible and buries his face into Greyson's shoulder, arm tightening around Greyson's waist. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Five more minutes."

Greyson scoffs and shakes his head, but soaks in the weight and warmth of his partner's cuddle. Cameron settles, but is clearly awake,

judging by the less rhythmic breathing and more mouthing at Greyson's skin. Eventually, what was once his attempt to fall back asleep turns into a desperate plea for attention. Greyson snickers, tipping his head up and letting Cameron leave his mark.

"Good morning," Greyson says again through his laughter.

"Morning," Cameron finally murmurs back, knee sliding across Greyson's waist and pinning him down. His hand slides up Greyson's neck and to his jaw, craning Greyson's head in his direction for a kiss. Greyson's arm tucks behind his head. Cameron grabs his other hand to pull them both over Greyson's head. "We got time."

"How much time?"

"Enough," Cameron pants against Greyson's mouth. Greyson takes a sharp breath as Cameron's hands squeeze around both his wrists and his jaw. "I like you like this."

"Restrained?"

"Quiet and malleable."

Greyson laughs again and takes the next kiss as it comes.

This isn't how he anticipated the holidays to go. This isn't what he thought his life would be. In the best way possible, he would never picture his life to be this way.

Greyson has never been in a relationship before, as sad as it sounds. Sure, he's kissed a couple cute boys in the corridor after school. Yeah, when he started college he just wanted to get rid of his virginity so it wouldn't hold him back, and he spent a few weeks of Freshman year being reckless. But he's never liked someone like this. Never felt those stupid butterflies like this. Never wanted someone like this.

Because as he kisses Cameron, as he experiences Cameron, he knows he wants nothing else and no one else for the rest of his days. He's found his match. He's found his other half. His final component.

Greyson's phone rang on the bedside table throughout their morning antics, but he chose to ignore it. Whoever it was could wait an extra hour. Or two. Or more.

Greyson kisses Cameron with everything in him, breathing a life of appreciation and lust into his mouth. Time moves achingly slow as

Greyson welcomes every inch of touch and every motion against him. Cameron's hands, calloused, gentle. His mouth, soft, warm. His legs, firm, pressed against Greyson's hips. Greyson wrung one hand through his hair, the other grabbing at Cameron's neck. The phone buzzes for what must be the sixth time.

"Whoever is calling you is ending up on my shitlist," Cameron murmurs. Greyson yanks Cameron down, pulling his hair at the base of his head, and kisses him.

"It's probably my mother. Just ignore her," Greyson exhales. "I'll call back later."

Cameron captures his mouth with full ferocity in hopes of ignoring the trilling sound— Greyson will admit, it's annoying him too. Not to mention the slight vibration to the bedsheets because of the stupid device.

The call gives up, and Greyson focuses back on their motions. She's leaving a message, he knows it. He wonders how many complaints he will hear later. He pushes the thought away in exchange for the bliss of Cameron's careful touch.

Merely 50 seconds later, it goes again, and both of them let out annoyed groans. Cameron hovers, catching his breath, and eventually collapses onto the bed beside Greyson with his arm draped across his face. Greyson reaches for his phone. Sure enough, Mum.

"Answer it so I don't need to hear your stupid ringtone again," Cameron begs through pants.

"Hi Mum," Greyson answers with false energy and a sarcastic smile, even if she can't see it.

"About time you answered me, Grey. I birthed you, I'd hope you're not ignoring your mother on this holiday of all days."

"Mum," Greyson huffs. "We're not even American. Why are you acting like we celebrate thanksgiving?"

"Well, my son moved to America, I assumed you would celebrate like one!" She is far too loud and intense for this moment in time. Greyson pinches the bridge of his nose. "What are you doing? Why were you ignoring my calls?"

"I was sleeping in, Mum," Greyson lies. "Yknow. Like college kids do

on a holiday. They sleep."

"It's far too late to still be sleeping, baby. I'm worried about you. Have you been talking to that therapist? Just because you're overseas doesn't mean you get to neglect your health— mental or physical. Doctor Rowland has plenty of virtual hours available-"

"Mum, will you please lay off? For one day?" Greyson requests. He's met with silence. "I'm alright. I swear. I-I actually went with a friend for the holidays to celebrate. We don't have dinner until late, though, so I slept in. I'm sorry." Cameron turns over to lay on his belly, tucking his chin on Greyson's chest. Greyson raises his eyebrows in frustration and wove their hands together.

"You… You went with a friend?" Mum repeats. "Off campus?" Oh god.

"Yeah."

"Grey…" She sounds like she could cry. Greyson didn't know what he would do if she started crying. "Oh, honey, I'm so proud of you." *What* ?

"Huh?"

"I-Im just so excited. I'm so happy that you're getting all these friends and experiences. Little drives off campus would be good for you. You're so agoraphobic, dear, I worry about you-"

He's agoraphobic? After everything? He's the problem?

Greyson takes a breath and just lets her profess her excitement until her words run dry and she realizes what she's doing—eating up his social time.

"Oh, honey- well, you go back to that friend of yours. I love you. I'm so proud of you. Talk later!"

"Love you too…" Greyson rubs his eyes. "Bye." he drops his phone at his side and lets out the most annoyed, exhausted, mortified groan he could muster, hiding his face in his hands. "I love her. I love my mother. I love my mother more than anything."

"Who are you trying to convince?"

"Myself," Greyson huffs, letting his hands fall away from his face. "She

called me agoraphobic! *Her* ! The woman who didn't let us have friends because she was scared of the outside world and what diseases they could have. *She* called *me* agoraphobic. Can you believe that?"

"Well-"

"Don't answer that," Greyson threatens. Cameron keeps quiet. Greyson presses himself upright in the bed, the sheet falling to his hips, and his hand propping behind him to hold him up. Cameron lays there, studying his figure in the morning light with a small smile. "My mother is the most lovely, caring, sweetest person alive. Everything she has ever done has been for our benefit. But my God she is dense."

"Mothers can be oblivious, Grey," Cameron exhales. "It's in the job description. They need to be poor at paying attention to justify their silly comments." Greyson nods, but he can't shake the idea.

Have you spoken to Doctor Rowland?

Not in a year. Not since last Christmas. He usually checks in whenever he's back in England, just for a regular session, just to catch up. Maybe unpack a couple things that built up over the semester, but otherwise, nothing much. Greyson avoided him over the summer– he was really trying to be normal, to be healthy, on his own.

"Hey," Cameron exhales, reaching and taking Greyson's hand. He sits up, scooting closer so their legs pressed together, so Greyson had no option but to look at him. "Let's… let's ignore it for now. You can think about it later. Let's have a good day today. Deal?"

"Yeah," Greyson sighs, nodding. "I like that idea."

"Good," Cameron presses a kiss to his forehead and pulls away. "Come shower with me."

"You always know just the right thing to say," Greyson cracks a smile, Cameron chuckling as the germaphobe scrambles after him toward the bathroom to scrub themselves clean of sweat and ick from their morning alone.

Post-shower, Greyson focuses on trying to get dressed and cleaned up enough to meet Cameron's parents, his family as a whole. Yesterday was one heck of a day with the sisters, and if they are that intense, he's nervous to see what Cameron's parents will be like, his grandparents, his aunts and uncles. Cameron helps him sift through the clothes in his duffle bag, picking out something that will look

decent but not overly formal– dark jeans and a collared shirt. Greyson feels like he looks like a dork as he plays with his hair in the mirror.

“I think I need a layer. Do you have a sweater I can borrow or something?”

“You sure you want a sweater?” Cameron calls back from the space he was getting dressed in. “It might get warm.”

“Worst case, I roll up my sleeves. So what?” Greyson hums, adjusting his collar over and over again.

Cameron appears behind him with one of his sweaters, a deep blue one that is quite possibly the softest fabric he has ever touched. Greyson shrugs it on over his head, both laughing as it falls a little too far past Greyson’s hips. Greyson plays around with the hem until it’s tucked loosely into his jeans and the collar pokes out properly. He rolls the sleeves to just above his wrists and adjusts all the fabric in the mirror.

“See? Better. Less stupid,” Greyson says, turning to face him. Cameron glances him over and smiles.

“I wouldn’t say less stupid,” Cameron tsks. “But I would say… very cute.”

Cute.

Boyfriend .

Greyson’s heart skips a beat.

“You’re stupid,” Greyson states, rather than recognizing the compliment that made his chest swell.

He sits on the edge of the bed as Cameron gets dressed– he’s much less concerned about looking nice than Greyson is. He just pulls on a tee-shirt and jeans like it’s any other day– barely combs his hair. The fanciest thing he does to be presentable is brush his teeth (thank god).

They’re out of the hotel by noon, on the road toward Cameron’s parents house again with their hands laced together between them and Greyson’s heart racing. Yesterday, when they pulled into the driveway, they were nothing more than friends with benefits at best. They were two wild college students on a road trip for the holiday.

Today, they are more than that. They're partners. Boyfriends. It's crazy how much can change in a few short hours.

The driveway is full when they pull in. Far more cars than they saw yesterday, that's for sure. Someone is coming out of their car as they pull up behind them– an older woman with a crew of kids spilling out of the minivan after her. They park the car, and Cameron immediately dives out of it to go hug his family member.

"Hey Auntie!"

How many aunts does this man have?

Greyson follows after him, admiring the bright smile on Cameron's face as his partner hugs his aunt, uncle, and all the cousins that pour out after him. He's grinning ear to ear, and they seem to praise the ground he walks on as they catch up in the driveway. Greyson stands behind him, just barely out of sight in hopes of going unnoticed, and slightly fearful of all the introductions he will have to do today. Hand shaking and smiles and questions galore- Greyson felt his gut churn.

They drift inside after his family without incident– they don't even ask about Greyson, they just politely smile and wave and move inside. It's only the second time Greyson has been inside Cameron's home, but it feels like the first with all the decorations and cleaning that's been done overnight– it's like a Thanksgiving bomb went off in the entryway, with candles, marvelous scents, and warm autumnal colors covering the bannister, the table beside the door, and shelving unit.

"Is that my Cameron?!" Dad calls out as the door shuts behind them. Cameron blushes a furious shade of pink, muttering an ' *oh god* '

A man pokes his head out the doorway leading to the kitchen at the end of the hall and breaks out in a grand, handsome grin. It's not the same as Cameron's– they don't look all too similar, but they do share the marvelous radiance that pours out of their smiling face. It's like a beacon of light shines directly on the man's son, because he breaks through the crowd of aunties and cousins to tackle his child in a crushing hug.

"That's my boy!" Dad exclaims gleefully. "Ah, I missed you. Welcome home."

"Missed you too," Cameron exhales, patting his father on the back and pulling out of the hug. "Where's Mom?"

“Trying to convince Callan to wear something other than her PJs,” Dad chirps, throwing an arm around Cameron’s shoulders and turning to face Greyson. His eyebrows shot up in interest. “Why, hello. You must be the ever so enchanting Greyson that my Cameron hasn’t shut up about this past week and a half. You can call me Colton.”

Greyson looks at Cameron with a devious smile, then back at his father.

“That’s me,” Greyson greets, standing slightly taller. “Do tell, what has he been saying?”

“We don’t need to get into that now, right Dad?” Cameron looks at his father intensely.

“Mm… later, I assure you,” his father insists. “I’d offer to shake your hand but… I’m a little messy from the turkey.” The man displays his rugged hands, shiny from cooking dinner with oils and butters galore.

“And you proceeded to wipe it on me?” Cameron pulls away, trying to look over his shoulder to see if his shirt was stained.

“Quit your whining, be grateful I’m cooking and not your grandma again,” Dad says before dragging them along to the kitchen. “Now, Greyson, tell me about the sports you play-”

Cameron stands beside Greyson at the island while the family all either cooks or drinks in preparation of dinner. Aunties and cousins are all working on their own dishes that either need to be heated up or plated appropriately, and Cameron’s father is working on deconstructing the turkey. Greyson discusses the sports he plays– tennis and volleyball– which earns some side eyes and interested nods as he explains them and his achievements in them. Cameron’s father seems most interested in the topic, leaning into the conversation with every passing word.

“I’m surprised. You seem like you would be a good soccer player,” Colton claims. “Ever thought about it?”

“My older brother played rugby and football. I tried it out for a bit too, but… I dunno. It didn’t stick. Not all too interested in the injuries. I blew out my knee in volleyball and I think that’s as aggressive as I’ll get.” Greyson jokes. Colton chuckles.

“Fair enough. I swear, Cameron was getting concussions every other week, or injuring an ankle or a shoulder… always had something

going on. Nothing will ever top that broken hand, though. Maybe I shoulda put you in tennis, bub."

"No," Cameron scoffs, shaking his head. "Not a chance."

"Why not?" Greyson raises an eyebrow. "You scared?"

"I'm not prancing around in a skirt on a rubber court all day," Cameron states simply with a small smirk.

"First of all, we wear pants," Greyson corrects. "And secondly, that rubber court can kick your ass. I would love to see you try."

"I've played ping pong. Can't be too hard."

"Says the man who can't play a game of billiards," Greyson rolls his eyes.

"Okay, that's not fair– you're, like, a God at it. Dad– Dad, I dare you to play a game of pool with Greyson before we go home. He's *insane* ," Cameron insists. Colton nods approvingly, grabbing a fork and tearing a chunk of turkey off the bird to give it a taste. He hums and nods in approval to himself, tossing the fork in the sink. "You wouldn't believe it. I've never seen anything like it."

"I'll have you know, Greyson… I haven't lost a pool game in, like, two years," Colton claims through his mouthful. Greyson shares a look with Cameron with a small smile. "I think I could play a-"

"Is that my baby boy?!" A woman squeals as she skitters closer. Cameron looks over his shoulder and smiles as the small woman throws her arms out to take him into a hug. "Oh, honey! You get bigger and bigger every time you come back. How is that even possible?" she presses kisses into Cameron's face, and he groans, trying to pull out of it. The woman has a death grip on him, though and refuses to let him go. "You better not be hopped up on steroids. Are you using? Be honest with me-"

"Mom!" Cameron whines, finally breaking free. "Stop…"

The woman is the picture-perfect image of where the siblings get their looks– sandy blond, bright eyes, all those facial features that are both so sharp yet soft… They are all spitting images of their mother, who does not look old enough to be the mother of four kids all in their late teens and early twenties. She barely looked old enough to be a mother at all.

“Take it easy on the boy, Cassie,” Colton murmurs. “He’s bulking up. It’s good for him. Losing that baby fat he had on him as a kid.”

“Dad-”

“Oh, but I miss when you had a little chunk to you,” she sighs, looking him over. “You had such a sweet little chubby face and now you’re this big adult man. Where did the time go?”

“Ma, Dad. Stop harassing him. This is why he doesn’t come home more,” Clarke sighs, joining them in the kitchen. She looks at Greyson and grins. “Oh, you stuck around. I’m glad I didn’t scare you off.”

“If anyone scared him, it’s Callan,” Cameron murmurs, elbowing Clarke. “And maybe Mom now, too.”

“No, no. You’re all very lovely,” Greyson says, despite Cameron being absolutely correct. Callan terrified him in the best way possible.

“By lovely, he means terrors to be around,” Cameron huffs. “Can I get a drink?”

“I opened a bottle of white. Greyson, wine?” Clarke offers, slithering through the crowd to get to the counter with the wine bottle and glasses all surrounding it.

Greyson nods, accepting gratefully. He takes a couple small sips and listens to the shuffle and constant rolling of voices milling around him. The sheer volume of bodies, of germs, surrounding him made him take another drink.

“Is that the sweater I got you last year?” Clarke asks with a cock of her head, smirking as she eyes Greyson’s top. Cameron glares at his sister.

“It’s-“ Cameron began, rapidly looking for an excuse.

“So, Greyson!” An elderly woman across the kitchen calls out, saving them from an eternity of terror. “C’mere. Let me grill you for a minute.”

“Uh oh,” Cameron mumbles, but shuffles over with Greyson. He seems less relieved by his Grandma’s interruption than Greyson is. “Uh Gram, this is my-my friend Greyson. Greyson, my Grandma.”

Friend .

Greyson didn't like that word anymore. He's not sure it was ever true for them. Were they ever friends? Once, they were enemies. Maybe even less. And once, they were civil. And once, they were… something. And now they're this. But never was it just friendly. Never friends .

"So I've heard. Tell me Grey, why aren't you home with your family this holiday?"

Grey . Greyson takes a breath. The list of people calling him that these days keeps growing. Though, he really loves the sound of it coming from Cameron's mouth, especially late at night in the sheets, breathed out like a dream.

"Well, I'm not from here. I'm from-from England, and they don't celebrate Thanksgiving. Y'know– American holiday, all that. And it's really expensive to get a flight home for, like, four days, so I just kinda… kinda hung around campus until someone picked me up like a stray cat," Greyson cracks a small smile.

"England, huh?" she hums, suddenly more interested. "All the way across the pond– are you at Brown too? It's one prestigious school. Your family must be very proud… They must miss you a whole lot, too. How did they feel about you moving so far?"

"Well…" Greyson shrugs. "You know. I would move away from them eventually. It's just… a little further than they thought. I talk to my Mum and my sister usually once a day– sometimes my Mum calls me so much I consider blocking her number." The three of them chuckle at the statement.

"Mum and sister back home– what about Dad? Any other siblings?"

"I have a brother too," Greyson confirms, narrowly skirting the other topic. "He's older than me, though. You know, life of his own. We're busy, so we just… cross paths when possible."

Lies. They don't cross paths ever if they can avoid it. Not as of late. They narrowly avoid one another at all times– barely ever stand in the same room when Greyson is back home, and certainly not texting on the off occasion.

"And your Dad?"

Dammit. Cameron opens his mouth to say something, but they are interrupted by Colton calling out.

“Alright! Come make your plates and go sit!”

“I need to get me some of that cornbread– we’ll talk later, honey, don’t go too far,” the woman wags her finger at Greyson and shuffles off to the kitchen to get her own plate. Cameron gently rests a hand on Greyson’s back and leans toward his ear.

“You alright? I’m sorry about her, she’s intense and-“

“I’m fine,” Greyson insists, squeezing his arm once and releasing.

“You sure? I’m not trying to subject you to the torture that is my family’s ceaseless prodding…” Cameron says, walking just behind him toward the line of people waiting for food.

“Really, it’s okay,” Greyson insists. Cameron doesn’t look convinced. “I’m not fragile, and I highly doubt I’m the only person here who has ever lost a parent. It’s fine.”

Sure, it stings a little when he’s mentioned. Sure, Dad’s image pops up in Greyson’s mind alongside an endless film roll of memories. But sometimes it's nice to remember him— to remember the scent of his body wash, and the firmness of his hugs, and the way they would play together when he and his brother were kids. Or even when he was only using a cane and would still go play in the yard with them, and when he was in his best states and could run with them, and when he was in his worst states and they would just cuddle up and watch movies together. The memories are good for the most part. Despite it all, or perhaps, in spite of it all, Greyson loved every moment with his father.

Maybe it would sting to say the words— “my dad passed away a few years back- “ but Greyson has felt that pain for a while now. At some point, it became commonplace. It became a natural ache.

They make their plates, and Cameron has a designated spot next to his father. Greyson sat on his other side, their legs pressed together under the table. Clarke sat on Greyson’s other side with a polite smile and friendly chatter.

“We say grace here,” Cameron whispers in Greyson’s ear between conversations. “Tolerate holding Clarke’s hand for, like, 30 seconds for me?” Greyson glances at Cameron with a small frown. “Please?”

“You are so lucky I like you,” Greyson murmurs back. Just as he does, there is a declaration for everyone to take hands, and Cameron’s

father speaks. Clarke holds Greyson's hand above the table with a playful smile and a roll of her eyes, shrugging off the odd religious tradition.

"Dear God, thank you for this food and this beautiful family we share it with. Thank you especially for bringing us all home together again, and for what will hopefully be another bountiful year ahead. Heavenly Father, bless us and these Thy gifts which we receive from Thy bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

"Amen," the table murmurs after him. Greyson restrains his amused smile and is relieved to release Clarke's hand again. Cameron shakes his head with a small smile at Greyson's expression.

The sound of cutlery against porcelain plates fill the room when voices don't, but with so many people, it's often loud. Cameron has so many aunts and uncles filling the room— two extra folding tables were added to the end of the dining table. Greyson felt a little guilty for taking one of the main chairs, but the kids didn't seem to mind all being joined together on the other end, avoiding adult conversation.

"How's the semester goin', Cam?" Colton asks between bites, glancing up from his turkey to stare down his son. "Grades? Partners? The frat? Football?"

"It's all good," Cameron says with a small smile. "Probably gonna make Dean's list again. Maybe president's list if I do some extra credit."

"Atta boy— how 'bout you, Greyson? What's the academics like?"

"Academics has always been my strong suit, sir" Greyson says with a proud but polite smile. "I'm graduating in a year, so I'm just wrapping it all up, I suppose."

"I bet," Colton hums. "What are your plans after? Go back to England? Stick around?"

"Haven't thought that far yet," Greyson hums. "My hope is to stay for a while. I have some good people here. But I can find something to do either way." Colton nods approvingly. Cameron squeezes his leg under the table.

"I bet," Colton smirks. "Girls, I want you listening in. Hard working young men over here— maybe you could take some tips. Free tuition doesn't hurt, either. You'll thank me later."

“Dad,” Cameron murmurs with an eye roll. “Not today.”

“Okay, okay-“ Dad raises his hands in defense. “I’m just so proud of you, bub. Good grades. Good people. Good everything.”

“Yeah yeah, he’s perfect, we get it,” Callan sighs, picking at her turkey. “Ivy League school, in a good frat, football captain, perfect life, yada yada yada. Can we talk about something else for once?”

“Cal,” Cameron hisses. Colton shot upright though, staring at his son. “I told you not to-“

“You got Captain?!”

Dammit.

Cameron’s stomach drops, and he feels all eyes go to him. Dad is breaking out in this beaming smile of pure pride, and Callan sinks in her seat as she realizes her mistake in all it’s grandeur.

“I knew you could do it! I knew it! You’re a fucking star, buddy! I have always told you, if you just tried, if you just put your mind to it, you could do anything. Maybe it took you a while, but you eventually did it, and that’s amazing! Football captain! My God— tell me all about it. Is it everything we dreamed of? Did you get your varsity jacket yet? How about your patch? We should go to a game soon to-“

Cameron tunes his father out, just smiling, nodding, and losing his appetite.

From one extreme to the other—he can never just exist in silence. Cameron listens to his father rave about his accomplishments, listens to him squeal and shout like an excited child going to their first Jonas Brothers concert. He is mentally exhausted by his father’s pride, never ending and painfully loud.

Everyone has something to say on it, too. Everyone has a piece to say. Everyone has an opinion. He needs to take control of the team, and he needs to assert power over the coaches, and this is his chance to change everything. Grandpa is telling him plays and grandma is asking how he got the promotion and Mom is asking how much he loves it and Callan… Callan silently receads to the background once more, alongside her two other sisters who are so often used to being overshadowed by their brother’s life— whether it be good or bad.

When dinner is over, Cameron excuses himself and Greyson to go

show him around, and mostly to get a break from all the noise. Greyson follows Cameron up the stairs, eyes wandering as he strolls. On one door next to the staircase reads the name *Callan* in beautiful cursive pink letter blocks. A few feet away, *Calyx* , in a sage green Times New Roman. Across the hall, in big block letters in two different colors: *Clarke + Cam* .

“Wanna see?”

“I’d love to get a glimpse at the childhood Cameron, yes,” Greyson chuckles as Cameron opens the door, granting him access. From all the way upstairs, it’s hard to hear the noise, the voices, the craze of his parents and grandparents. They are secluded in a world of their own within Cameron’s past life.

Cameron loves his family. Truly, honestly, he does. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t hard to. That doesn’t mean they’re perfect.

Cameron watches Greyson’s wondrous eyes examine every inch of his childhood bedroom, untouched since he moved away to college, and he can’t help but imagine a childhood himself— one other than his own. One more magical and forgiving.

A keyboard piano sits against the wall on the same side of Cameron’s bed— once upon a time, a little boy released his pent up aggression and anger into those keys when he had everything else taken away from him. His bed, which he never made and always forgot to wash the sheets of, sits tucked away in a corner. He recalls the years of sitting in the corner of the two walls, scowling, hating it all. Hating the expectations. Hating his sister for being perfect. Hating himself for not being perfect. The paint on the wall next to his bed is peeling from his childhood picking and fidgeting. Mom used to yell at him every time the patches on the wall grew. His desk is covered in notes and hobbies he forgot about, and his bookshelf is covered in trophies and awards that gave Dad a fighting reason to be proud.

For the majority of his childhood, he was nothing to be proud of. For his entire childhood, he wasn’t enough. Not for his parents. Not for Clarke, who was more hands-on with her siblings than any oldest sibling should have to be. Not for anyone. Cameron was a disappointment with too high of expectations set upon him.

And now, he is the expectation. He is the grandeur his parents want for everyone. He is the reason they treat Callan like she is just as troublesome as Cameron used to be. Even if Callan is a genius, and

sweet, and hilarious, and doesn't have the truancy issues Cameron did. He is the reason Calyx gets into trouble for every "B" letter grade— as if Cameron wasn't doing poorly in most classes until the end of the semester when he finally turned everything in. He is the reason they completely forget about Clarke, even if Clarke is always carrying the weight of the family and its issues on her shoulders. And he is the reason he is both perfect and forever "troubled", no matter how hard he works to make up for his problematic childhood.

"There's no pictures," is the first thing Greyson says. "On your side, at least-"

Clarke's side is the shining image of perfection. Her walls are a beautiful muted ladylike color. Her bed is made. Her desk is clean and her bookshelf is color coded. Her hobby was violin, and it sat in it's case, propped against the wall. There were no posters or scratchings into the desk or even some crayon on the wall— just a corkboard of photos and greeting cards.

"I didn't take any as a kid," Cameron murmurs, leaning against the doorway and studying the space too. The bedroom is larger than he remembers. He felt like it was so tiny and cramped when he and Clarke were both in here. Clarke snored at night, and Cameron was the most antsy kid alive. It made for a tense room. "Nothing important I wanted to keep as a memory."

"No?" Greyson thumbs through the things on Cameron's desk. "I loved taking photos as a kid. I have countless disposable cameras of me and my family just screwing around together…"

"Well…" Cameron shrugs. Greyson looks over his shoulder and frowns. "Don't… don't look at me like that."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're upset. Tell me," Greyson presses, shuffling toward him.

"I just… didn't get along with my family growing up. It was a battlefield at all times. Sometimes it's weird to come home to a family that likes me," Cameron exhales, not looking Greyson in the eye. He wrung his fingers around themselves and watched the floor. "I was the only boy. I'm their only son, and… and I could never be good enough for them. I acted out a lot. I didn't get the help I needed. Everything I ever did was in spite of them. I flunked through school until they

started thinking I was stupid, then I got into an Ivy League college just to rub it in their face that I could do it all along. And every accomplishment kinda… kinda feels like a backhand, after a while."

"And that's why you didn't want to tell your Dad about being captain," Greyson assumes, leaning against the wall.

"I knew he would be happy for me. We're… we're in such a good place lately. It took a lot of work, and-and… y'know. Distance makes the heart grow fonder, or whatever. But sometimes I don't want it to be about me anymore. Sometimes I'm tired of being looked at. Clarke is this-this successful woman with an amazing life and always doing everything my parents could dream for me to do, and they barely glance at her. Callan is known for being a problem child like me, and it drives them crazy despite the fact that she is so smart and incredible. And-and I think they gave up by the time Callie grew up. I'm always the focus, and it would be nice to get a break, y'know?"

"Is that why I'm here?" Greyson asks with a slight teasing smile. "To be someone for everyone else to look at instead of you?"

"Well, no, but… if you're offering," Cameron gives a halfhearted smile.

Greyson laughs, shaking his head. Cameron blushes a burning shade of red as Greyson wrapped an arm around the back of his neck. Cameron loosens up in Greyson's embrace, resting his hands on Greyson's hips.

"I would love to be your distraction if it means you get to have a nice holiday," Greyson whispers. "I don't mind the questions."

"I just… I don't want them to scare you off. I only just got you."

"And I'm only here for a few days," Greyson scoffs. "Between your family and mine… trust me, Cam… mine is insane. I'm okay." He twirls a chunk of Cameron's hair in between his fingers, cocking his head to the side. "You have this habit of exceeding expectations, y'know." Cameron rolls his eyes. "Here I was, thinking you were a big jerk— this asshole I couldn't stand. In reality… you are a big jerk-asshole that I very much like having around."

"You're an idiot," Cameron scoffs, looking away from him, but hands sliding over Greyson's hips. Greyson smiles, pressing up to leave a gentle kiss against the corner of Cameron's mouth. "Thank you."

"For calling you an asshole?"

“Sure. Let’s go with that…”

Cameron remembers the moment he started to change his mind about Greyson. He remembers it vividly. It was a night where Rowan just wanted them all to be friends. They went to that diner in downtown Providence— Cameron felt a little empathy every time he looked over to find him sitting in his misery. At first, Cameron thought it was him being pretentious— too good to spend time with them— but then Rowan said that word— germaphobe— and there was a split moment of guilt. In every interaction Cameron has had with self-proclaimed germaphobes, they are simply avoiding getting sick, but their interactions in public proved it to be a true and total phobia. Cameron recalls watching him grimace when he touched the menu, and how he inspected his fork so closely, and when they got to the car, he bathed in hand sanitizer. There was a hint of empathy in that evening that Cameron didn’t feel before.

And sure, there was also that cherry moment. The maraschino cherry resting on his tongue, pulling from its stem with his lips, which Cameron could, in that moment, only picture as a dark shade of pink and maybe a little puffy. He wondered if Greyson knew how to tie knots with the stem on his tongue. He seemed like the kind of guy who could do that. And Cameron recalls that panic— that intrusive feeling of lust, looking at someone who he should most definitely not feel such a way for. He recalls the disgust and the internalized hatred of that feeling— he came to terms with his queerness early on, but Greyson? It felt too far.

Now, it feels like not enough. He will spend forever reminding himself just how much Greyson makes him feel good. Just how much his enemy, his friend with benefits, his partner makes him feel good. Physically, emotionally, spiritually good.

“Cameron? Honey? Dad’s been asking for you to- oh! I’m sorry,” Cassandra jumps at the sight of her son in a warm embrace with his guest. She turns to walk away. “I’ll leave you-“

“No, you’re fine,” Cameron pulls away from Greyson, straightening upright and approaching his mother. “What does he need?”

“Something to do with the garage— picking up something heavy or reaching something up high? I don’t know…” Cassandra blushes a deep shade of red. “But if I’m interrupting-“

“No worries. I’ll go,” Cameron slides past his mother rapidly in an

effort to duck out of this moment. Greyson is also a horrific shade of pink, now standing alone upstairs with Cameron's mother.

"I wasn't trying to-to walk in on anything," Cassandra says with a small, nervous laugh.

"Nothing was happening. Just… talking about this," Greyson eyes the room around him. "What it was like here. Childhood."

"How much did he say?" His mother exhales, slowly inching into the room. She sits on the edge of his made bed, gently caressing the old quilt with a sad smile. "We struggled a lot. He struggled a lot. So… so it's nice to see him so happy these days."

"I bet," Greyson bites his cheek, glancing around.

"We were… far from perfect. Still are. But he's always been our perfect little boy, no matter the trouble, and no matter the struggle…" Greyson sees the light in her eyes, so warm, so loving. That is the look of a mother who gives her all. Greyson wonders if his Mum ever looks like that. "I worry about him, all on his own up there. But I guess I shouldn't be too stressed. He seems like he has a good group up there."

She looks at him when she says it, pointedly, purposefully. He felt his chest flutter. If only she knew.

Bryce, Aiden, Liam— they were his crew. They were his trouble. And Greyson— Greyson was his trouble, too.

Well— still is. Just a different kind of trouble.

"I don't want to-to make any presumptions about… about you, or your family, or any of that. But I just want you to know, now, Christmas, or ever in the future, if you need someplace to go, holidays, or otherwise, you're welcome here," Cassandra hums, looking up at him. "I love that smile on his face. I love that energy in him. And knowing you're the cause of it… you feel like a cure we've waited forever for."

His stomach explodes into a storm of butterflies. They've been official for a day, but Greyson feels like he's been here forever. He feels like Cameron and him have been one in the same for forever. A cure, his mother said. Greyson wonders if she realizes how deep those words cut into Greyson's soul.

"Thank you," Greyson says with a small smile, looking down at the

floor, rocking on his heels.

“I think I’ve lectured enough. I’ll let you go,” Cassandra says with a nervous laugh. “He’s probably in the garage with his father. At the bottom of the stairs, the door is right there to go in.”

Greyson nods, and takes his exit immediately. Cassandra stays in the bedroom of her two eldest children, looking around and reminiscing of the hardest years of their lives.

At the bottom of the stairs, sure enough, the doorway to the garage was open, and the two men of the family were working together to drag out some Christmas decorations in light of the new holiday approaching. Cameron’s brow was damp with sweat as he lugs a large box off the top shelf, his arms trembling slightly at the weight. When he lowers it to the ground, it makes a thud noise.

“The hell is in that? Bricks?” Cameron huffs.

“I dunno. It’s your mother. Blame her,” Dad chuckles, patting him on the shoulder. “My back ain’t liftin’ this shit no more, though.”

“You’re getting old, pops,” Cameron mentions, dragging another box off another shelf. “Gonna have to put you in a home.”

“I got four kids for a reason. I’ll throw myself off the roof before I get put in a home.”

“I sure as hell ain’t wiping your ass and changing your diapers,” Cameron snickers, glancing over his shoulder. He smiles softly. “My Mom talk your ear off?”

“I wouldn’t say that -“ Greyson murmurs, shuffling in.

“I would. The woman can go on for an eternity if you let her,” Colton claims. Greyson snickers.

He remembers when his parents used to prod and tease like that— how his father used to make silly comments about the things that mildly annoyed him, and how Mum would always say how she’d be “ *taking care of him and playing nurse forever* ”— which usually earned some lewd comment about roleplay that made Greyson and his brother groan in disgust. Greyson recalls his parents being disgustingly in love— in sickness and in health — Greyson can only hope to have that one day.

“Want any help?” Greyson offers. Cameron cracks a smirk.

“With your noodle arms? Sure,” Cameron scoffs. “Take that one. I think its just a couple loose scraps of paper.”

“Aye! Be nice to the boy. He seems like a solid fella,” Colton claims.

“Only thing solid about him is his skull,” Cameron teases, ruffling Greyson’s hair as he approaches. “Got one thick head.”

“Plenty of room for a big brain,” Greyson says back.

“And yet it rattles like a maraca.”

Playful teasing, jostling, shouldering. Greyson’s body is encapsulated by that storm of lovely little butterflies— a hurricane that whisps him around central Florida— seeing a past that once was and a future that might be.

It’s only one day, and it already feels like a lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

> ignore any shitty editting i have had a WEEK and i wanna get this out asap and i have an exam to do by midnight so HERE READ THIS AND DONT BE MAD IF IT SUCKS K THANKS
>
> anyways happy friday have a good weekend BYEEE EXAM TIME
> -hayl

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Make do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They are invited to Cameron's parents house for breakfast the next morning.

They barely get dressed— both boys are exhausted, and Cameron insists they don't need to impress anyone. Thus, they arrive in comfortable clothing, half awake, and hungry. It's a damn good thing, because the house smelled of all types of delicious food and even better coffee.

"Hi bub," Cassandra chirps as Cameron shuffles into the kitchen, kissing her on the cheek in passing. "Make some plates and sit, please! Welcome back, Grey. You want a coffee?"

"I would love some."

"I'll make you a mug. Sit," Cameron hums, touching Greyson's back gently as he slides past him. Greyson smiles up at his partner and agrees, sitting down with two of the three sisters. "No Clarke?"

"Shopping. You know how she is about holiday deals," Cassandra tsks. "Greyson, honey, do you like cream and sugar?"

"Yes ma'am," Greyson blushes as he watches Cameron cringe and steadily make Greyson's coffee for him. The poor boy is struggling, but Greyson applauds the effort. Cameron comes over with plates and a mug in hand. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. Maybe I poisoned it."

"Yeah, yeah," Greyson rolls his eyes and sits back into his seat, taking a sip. It is quite honestly the worst coffee he has ever had— the brew is weak, and Cameron put in way too much cream and not enough sweetener, but he doesn't say a damn word. He's just appreciative that he did it.

“Do you think Clarke realizes she spends more money because of the illusion of sale?” Cameron asks as he eats a mouthful of strawberries. Greyson props his chin on his hand and studies the expressions on his face with nothing but admiration of the man in such a natural state. “If she just bought the stuff on a regular day, she wouldn't spend extra money on unnecessary things. And then she complains about being broke.”

“Okay Mister Financial Literacy. You try telling her that,” Colton nudges his son. “You think I dare to tell your sister what to do? I’ve learned my lesson. Clarke is the most stubborn kid I have ever met.”

“She’s not a kid. She’s an adult,” Callan murmurs, looking half alive, clinging to her coffee mug.

“You’re all kids. You’ll always be kids,” Colton chuckles, jokingly knocking his son’s arm and then nudging Callan. His daughter didn’t seem so amused. Greyson glances at Cameron. He doesn’t look too keen either.

“What your father means is,” Cassandra throws her arms around Callan’s shoulders, kissing her head. “Is that you’ll always be our babies.”

That look of annoyance, of despair, disappears upon a mothers touch. Greyson recalls that exact feeling— turmoil, and exhaustion, and fake smiles, all resolving into comfort and solitude with Mum at his side. He should call her soon… actually call her. Not just… skirt by with nothing much to say. Especially with the holidays coming up and all…

“Mom…” Callan groans, but smiles as Cassandra peppers another kiss to her face. “C’mon. It’s first thing in the morning-”

“I can’t love my girl?”

“Not at 8:30 AM!”

Cameron and Greyson share a look, and Greyson smiles.

It’s easy to miss those days of familial love, of kisses and hugs and annoying amounts of love. Being exhausted by how much a parent loves you, sometimes even needing a break from that love. But once it’s gone… you miss it forever.

“So, boys, what’s the plan for today?” Colton asks.

“Well…” Cameron yawns, tossing an arm over the back of Greyson’s chair and sits back. “We’re hitting the road after we leave here– see how far we can get before we need to sleep, and maybe take a scenic route to see some cool stuff on the way home.” Cameron glances at Greyson again with a tempting smile. Greyson wants to kiss him when he smiles like that. He holds his mug of coffee tighter and looks down. “I dunno. Part of the fun is not having a plan.”

Greyson rolls his eyes and makes eye contact with Colton.

“I’m hoping we get a late lunch in this place in Atlanta– I liked the menu when we drove through the first time but they are more of a lunch spot than dinner, so we passed it by,” Greyson answers. “We’ll probably crash for the night in North Carolina. I’ve done research and it’s apparently a really good state for the stars because of the lack of light pollution and the climate-”

“What’s next, we're going on a picnic in the park with some cute little lemonades?” Cameron teases, taking a bite of his toast.

“You’re such a man,” Callie huffs. “Take the boy on a date for christ's sake.”

“It’s not a date-” Greyson says.

“This whole trip is a date, are you kidding? He met the parents and everything,” Cameron says back to his youngest sister. Greyson smacks his arm.

“It’s not a date. I just like to plan things, because if you don’t plan, you end up having virtually no bathroom breaks on a nearly 24-hour car ride,” Greyson shot back.

“Not my fault you have a peanut for a bladder,” Cameron scoffs.

“Boys, boys…” Cassandra hums. “Cameron, honey, you’ve always been so… loosey-goosey. Maybe it’s good for you to let someone plan something for once.”

“Great. You’re taking his side,” Cameron chuckles. “Now I will be dragged through an ancient art museum for six hours talking about color theory.”

“Oh no, poor little white city boy has to experience culture,” Callan teases. Cameron glares at her.

“I have no need for a museum! Just, y’know, the ability to not sit in the passenger seat for twelve hours straight without a pee break.”

“He’s like a pregnant woman who needs to pee every thirty minutes. How do you survive the flight home at the end of each semester?” Cameron looks at him with raised eyebrows.

“Planes have bathrooms, Cameron! And it’s not a twelve hour flight! It’s, like, five!”

The bickering over breakfast continues for what has to be about forty-five minutes, or until everyone is done with their food, and Cameron is forced to help set up Christmas decorations with his mother– “put those muscles to use!” as Cassandra says. Greyson sits back with Callan and laughs at him as his mother loads boxes into his hands and directs him to where they need to go, and bullies him into setting up the Christmas tree. Greyson keeps an eye on the clock– they still need to get out of here early if they want to make good time– but it’s quite nice watching Cameron experience some holiday festivities and laughter surrounded by loved ones.

Cameron clicks the final piece of the Christmas tree together, and immediately, all the lights pre-tangled into the branches pop up in magnificent white light. The room sparkles with holiday joy, and at the same moment, the door swings open, a disheveled Clarke walking through the door with bags hanging from her arms.

“Oh, good, the tree is up. I got stuff to put under it.”

“Did you already wrap them, too?” Callan asks, watching as the eldest sibling unloads bags and stuffs them under the tree in various places.

“Duh. They have wrapping stations after checkout. I know how you heathens are– always snooping through my apartment for gifts,” Clarke wags her finger in the younger set of sisters’ faces. “Can’t snoop if they’re already wrapped.”

“Careful. You never know with those two,” Cameron chuckles, wiping his brow and planting his hands on his hips. He makes eye contact with Greyson and raises an eyebrow. “Ready?”

“Oh, you leave the second I show up?” Clarke huffs. “Fuck you too.”

“Aye! Language!” Colton shouts from the kitchen.

“You knew we had to leave before noon. Not my fault you were too

busy shopping," Cameron mutters.

"Not my fault you brought a boyfriend home for Christmas that I have to shop for now, too!"

"No, no– you don't have to-" Greyson began.

"Shut up, Greyson. I will do what I want," Clarke points at him. "When are you coming back? Please tell me you'll be here for the holidays or something…"

"I'm in England after finals and until the week of Christmas," Greyson says with a small frown. " I'll be back in America for New Years Eve-"

"Perfect! Fly back in to Florida and we'll do a late holiday with you-"

"Clarke," Cameron groans. "Please, leave him alone."

"You have until, what, mid-January until you can go back to the dorms? Are you dorming? I'd assume so but– anyways, you could come back down to Florida, and we could probably do Disney or something-"

"Alright! Okay– we gotta hit the road. Good to see you," Cameron announces, interrupting his excited older sister. "Hugs!"

"Oh, so soon?!" Cassandra cries out, throwing herself toward her son for an embrace. "Oh, baby– drive safe, will you? Don't you be acting crazy. There's a lot of crazies on the road this time of year and you don't need to be one of them."

Greyson awkwardly sidesteps as the family of six all conjoins into a huddle around the only son in the family– they revolve around him like the sun, too. Like flowers, drifting in his direction on instinct. There's something about Cameron, a magnetic, gravitational pull that makes everyone and anyone draw nearer and nearer with every passing moment. Lord knows that's what happened to Greyson– he was a safe distance away, and yet, here he is, suddenly in his grasp.

Is he the sun, or a black hole? Greyson isn't sure. Only time will tell…

Cassandra starts toward Greyson with open arms, too. His heart flutters in both fear, nerves, and surprise as the woman embraces him in that tight motherly hug Greyson hasn't received in a year-too-long. He tenses, but slowly relaxes into the warmth of her arms. She reminds him of Cameron– loving in every way.

“It was so nice meeting you, honey. Come back soon. No pressure, though…” she retracts, looking Greyson in the eye. “I hope we didn’t scare you off yet.”

“No, ma’am,” Greyson nods with an awkward smile. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Good. Have a very Merry Christmas if we don’t hear from you before then.”

“You too.”

“Let’s go!” Cameron calls out, wrestling out of the hold of his three sisters, all trying to restrain him to the house. “If you wanna beat the lunch rush in Orlando, we need to leave-”

Greyson laughs and excuses himself, waving to the sisters and shaking Cameron’s father’s hand before ducking out of the doorway. The two get to the car, buckled, and Greyson’s hands sanitized and rolling off his tension, when one of the sisters runs up to Greyson’s car window, knocking rapidly.

“Wait!” Callan exclaims. Greyson rolls down the window. “Here.” She shoves an envelope into Greyson’s hands. He furrowed his eyebrows, looking up at her. “Bye!”

“What the-” Cameron frowns as Callan darts back into the house, then looks at the envelope in Greyson’s hand. “Open it. What is it?”

“None-ya!” Greyson pulls away, holding the envelope away from his boyfriend. “My eyes only, mister.”

“It’s my sister-”

“And she gave it to me !”

“Where the fuck are you?”

“Well, good morning to you too,” Greyson grumbles, half awake as he turns over in bed. The other half is empty. Greyson isn’t sure where Cameron went– though, it’s not like he could have gone far. They’re in the middle of nowhere-North-Carolina, and Greyson is 90% sure he heard the bathroom door close a few minutes ago.

“No- no. None of that bullshit. Where are you? I get to the dorm and you’re fucking gone. I left Providence and you were in the midst of a

meltdown and I come back and your bed isn't made and you're gone," Rowan argues. "And I know you aren't at the cafeteria, because your campus card is still here, and you never leave your bed unmade-"

"Ro," Greyson huffs. "Chill. I'm fine. I'm literally headed home now."

"That doesn't answer my question! Where are you?"

Greyson's question, though, is answered when a damp Cameron emerges from the bathroom with a towel dawned over his hips and his hair a wet mess. Greyson settles into his place in the bed and smiles at the sight, eyeing his partner over as he emerges. Cameron ruffles his hair with a smaller towel, shooting a smirk at Greyson when he flips his head right-side-up again.

"I'm about to eat, so I gotta go. See you in a few hours. Or tomorrow," Greyson lies.

"Greyson!"

Cameron laughs as Greyson ends the call and tosses his phone aside, lunging forward on the bed and dragging Cameron closer by the towel around his hips. Their mouths crash together in a feverish want and an excitable need to expel some morning energy. Cameron holds Greyson's face oh-so gently, thumbing at his cheek, his jaw, passing his hand over Greyson's throat and to his bare chest.

"Who was it?"

"Ro," Greyson mumbles against his mouth.

"What are you gonna tell him when we get back?"

"No fucking clue," Greyson chuckles, pushing the white fabric off of Cameron's hips and dragging him onto the bed with him. "That's future-me's problem."

Cameron snickers against his mouth, and they fall into a heap against stranger sheets and foreign pillows, knowing they will likely never see these four walls again. This felt like the craziest moment in life they will both ever experience.

The roads are long, and the stops are short. It's a ten hour drive remaining, and they hit the highway by 9:00 AM– they are on perfect track to be home by 9PM at the latest. Cameron's hand rests on Greyson's thigh, drumming along with the tempo of whatever song

starts playing. Greyson cracks a small smile as he does. He's never met someone who goes with the tempo. Maybe the drumline, or whatever sound was most prominent— lyrics, guitar, bass, etc.

But Cameron is a musician. He's a pianist. And he focuses not on the overpowering guitar riff of *Livin' on a Prayer* , or the lyrical input. His fingers are steadily tapping against Greyson's leg in 123-beats-per-minute. Greyson reaches over and his fingers trace over the back of Cameron's neck, oh so delicately, watching his eyelids flutter and the corner of his lips twist upwards.

Three hours into the drive, the humming began. Greyson was trying to take a catnap with his head propped against the cracked open window, breathing in some fresh air and using Cameron's jacket as a blanket. Cameron had turned the volume down a few songs prior to let Greyson sleep, but apparently a particularly good one came on, because he clicked the volume up by two notches and hummed along with the tune. The tapping resumed on Greyson's leg, and in his half awake state, Greyson fights off rest to listen. The hum becomes soft lyrics passing them by, whispering out the windows and down the highway into the abyss.

" *Are you having fun* ?" He murmurs to himself. Greyson picks up on the gentle tune, which slowly tries to lull him back to sleep. " *I've never felt this way about anyone…* "

Greyson felt the corner of his mouth twist up.

" *I can't wait until we lay out in the sun… out of all your playlists, what's your favorite one? Tell me your favorite one -*"

His voice sounds like whipped cream and ice cream. Like the taste of smoothness on your tongue, crisply cold while beautifully sweet. Like a treat, special for the day. Greyson has never heard him sing before, and he's quite certain he wasn't supposed to be hearing him now.

" *Can you take me to Tru Luv Street* ?" He sings with the chorus. Greyson takes a strong breath in, and Cameron doesn't sing the next line, going quiet. His hands fall still, too. Greyson adjusts how he sat, hand sliding across Cameron's wrist, and craning so, rather than the window, his head rests on Cameron's shoulder.

Cameron smiles silently to himself, thumb slowly tracing along Greyson's thigh, and relaxes under the pressure of Greyson against him. They pass the sign that reads *Now Entering District of Columbia* , and Greyson settles back into sleep.

When he wakes next, they're stopped at a gas station, and Greyson is craned awkwardly in the passenger seat with his head on the center console with an article of clothing under his head like a pillow. He slowly picks himself upright and looks around, finding Cameron's open bag in the backseat, his sweater in Greyson's hands. Greyson cracks a small smile and traces the fabric over his cheek and lip, blinking himself back to life.

His limbs stretch with a small tremble, and he spots Cameron leaning against the car beside the gas pump, his phone pinned to his ear. Greyson gets out and stretches, Cameron's gaze lifting at the sound of the car door. Greyson stretches out his limbs and pats his pockets for his wallet, walking into the convenience store to grab something caffeinated.

When he returns to the car, Cameron is now parked in front of the building, leaning against the car door, still on his phone. Greyson holds out a drink he purchased from his partner and cracks open his own. Cameron touches his finger to his lips and throws an arm around Greyson's shoulders.

"No, yeah, I get it, man, but he's a grown adult. Maybe give him some space," Cameron murmurs. There's a rambled chatter on the other end that sounds plenty familiar. Greyson props his head against Cameron's shoulder and yawns, swigging the energy drink. "Ro. Seriously, you said it yourself. He was a wreck when you left. Maybe he went on some spontaneous trip to-to clear his head."

Greyson covers his snicker with his hand and breaks away so as to not reveal himself.

"No, I will not tell him to call you. He's your friend. That sounds like a you problem. If he wants you to know where he is, he'll tell you."

Greyson eyes his partner over, getting more attracted by the stern voice he puts on by the minute. Or perhaps it was him, too comfortable with their time alone. He's not sure how he will possibly be able to resume life in Rhode Island, where things are normal and he is not.

The conversation ends shortly thereafter, and Cameron's phone gets pocketed again. He sends a pointed look at his companion, eyebrows raised and his teeth chewing on his cheek.

"We need to figure out how the fuck we're handling this when we get home."

“Well, we have…” Greyson checks the maps app and purses his lips. “6 hours and 15 minutes to decide.”

“This is ridiculous,” Cameron scoffs, but reaches out to pull Greyson in. The shorter of the two tumbles against him with a stupid laugh, burying his face in Cameron’s shoulder. Cameron leaves a kiss to the top of his head. “You’re always getting me into some kind of trouble.”

“Okay, Mister- Tells-Your-Parents ,” Greyson murmurs, tilting his head up and looking at Cameron.

He has this look on his face, one that doesn’t replicate the expression in the hotel room when they first made the decision to be together. It doesn’t look anything like how he looked in his childhood bedroom, wrapped in safety and secluded love. It’s nothing like the way they felt in all the hotel and motel rooms on this long-weekend journey.

Instead, he looks something like a version of his old self. Stonier. Colder. More… fraternity-like. He reminds Greyson of the Cameron that sat in his dorm at the beginning of the semester with Bryce, Aiden, and Rowan, all crowding and dirtying his space. He reminds Greyson of the Cameron that partied every weekend and shot nasty looks at him every time he opened his mouth. He reminded Greyson of the Cameron that was never outwardly mean, but definitely didn’t want much else to do with Greyson.

“What are you thinking?” Greyson asks in a whisper, a daring ask for his fragile heart.

“I think…” Cameron takes a breath. “That we keep this quiet from… from them.”

Greyson nods slowly.

“It’s still not… not entirely safe back home. I don’t want to risk it. I don’t want to get anyone hurt, or in trouble. I don’t want to worry. I just…” Cameron cracks a small smile. “I want to keep you to myself, and keep us safe.”

It feels backwards– telling the family, then their friends. It feels odd to be a secret. Greyson was never the type to hide his identity. That feels like one of the few things he was rarely anxious about. Sure– he was scared of being hate-crimed. He was scared of homophobia. But he wasn’t scared of being queer. He wasn’t scared of being seen like that. The gay-ness was never his fear, but the danger of being open.

So he supposes he understands. He supposes he sees why Cameron wants some peace and quiet.

“Okay,” Greyson’s smile turns up ever so slightly in the corner. It took a considerable amount of effort to do so. “I can do that.”

“Not for forever,” Cameron insists. “Just… give things a little time to settle after… after the stuff that happened with the guys. Let the season end. That kind of stuff. Then we can… we can be loud as you want. Or quiet. Whatever you want. You can have anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“Well-”

They both laugh quietly to themselves, and Greyson settles back into the embrace. He will make-do, as they say. He will make it work. Whatever it is to make this possible, to be successful, to have it all… he will… he will do it.

If silence is what Cameron needs, Greyson’s lips are sealed. If quiet is what he wants, Greyson won’t utter a peep. Behind closed doors, in the closets with monsters going unseen. Whatever makes it work.

When Greyson arrives home that night, he is physically exhausted from travel, festivities, and fun. He opens his door to find the dorm a mess, and empty. Rowan is gone. Greyson lets out a small breath of relief and slowly kicks off his shoes and unpacks his belongings back into his laundry and organizers respectively. He picks up shoes, dishes, and laundry from Rowan’s return to clean up and gathers his belongings to shower off the past four days.

It’s nearly 10:00 PM. The majority of Brown University is partying, celebrating a long weekend leading to the final full week of classes before exams. Greyson can hear a city full of music and life, knowing damned well he won’t be leaving his dorm until Monday for class.

He showers in the stalls, steaming the germs and foreign bodies from his skin, scrubbing himself clean with soap and sudsing up his hair with shampoo. He feels spoiled after four days of showering with company. He feels lonely being so… solitary.

Redressing in pajamas, ruffling his hair with a towel and drying it to the best of his ability with a hair dryer. People pass in and out of the

common bathroom behind him without acknowledgement. They are unaware of where he's been or what he's done. They don't care for his existence at all. He barely knows some of their names, and yet, he recalls their conversations of seeing their grandparents for the holidays, or going to Hawaii, or staying here on campus. They know nothing of him, though. No one will.

He passes down the hall to his dorm room again. It's still dark and silent. Greyson sits at his desk and looks at the envelope Callan passed him yesterday morning. It feels like eons ago now. Carefully, he peels back the glued paper and pulls out a silly cat-shaped sticky-note.

In curly, squiggled handwriting (and purple sparkly gel pen), three phone numbers are written down, the respective name and note next to it.

Clarke– for when you need someone to reason with

Callan– for when you need someone to knock some sense into you

Calyx– for when you need someone to reason with and knock some sense into Cameron.

The weight of the past few days sits heavier and heavier on his shoulders, realizing what he's done. What he's doing.

He's dating. He's seeing someone. He's seeing Cameron . He's met his parents, and his sisters, and seen his childhood bedroom. He's seen every way that makes Cameron human when Greyson barely feels real on his own.

After years of being single, years of following his own lead, of living plenty comfortably without a counterpart… here he is. He loves the feeling in the moment– he loves the feeling of being seen, of being liked, but in every passing second of being alone, of being a secret… It feels weird. It feels wrong. Shameful.

But he will do it. For the happiness of their time together, he will sit through the discomfort of solitude.

He will make do.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmmm

Not my best chapter, but I really needed to wrap up the florida arc and get back to Providence so we can get to CHRISTMAS !!! i feel like i've done terrible at getting chapters out on time. it's a little annoying that christmas just happened irl and i'm only now about to write about it but its fine we're fine no stress a ha a aha yup all good.

Any whomst'd've..
happy new year !! it's january 1st, 2023, and we're gonna make this a good year. i'm sure of it.
Until next time
Hayl (hayloftown on twt)

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

On a knife's edge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Sunday morning, Greyson booked his flight back to England for the holidays, scheduled to arrive in Heathrow late in the evening of December 13th. His classes will all be over with, and his finals will be submitted, and he can just relax at home with his mother and sister for a few weeks until the spring semester begins.

Rowan, amazingly enough, didn't harass him for answers on where he's been or who he was with. Instead, he was more so focused on asking Greyson stupider questions like " *are you okay?* " and " *what's on your mind?* " It's like he's a fucking psychology major all of a sudden.

When Rowan isn't bugging him, he's just… gone. Disappears off the face of the Earth. Greyson could text him— text anyone in his friend group, and not a damn word is mentioned on what he's doing or who he's with. And maybe it's a little hypocritical, but… Greyson cares! He wants to know where the hell he is! And he wants to know if he should deadbolt the door at night, or if Rowan's gonna get mad if Greyson eats without him.

This morning, Greyson stands in line for breakfast silently, alone, in the seclusion of an early morning dining hall. His headphones were on as an effort to avoid unnecessary conversation with classmates who might also be up at an ungodly hour. He had a very strict plan for today: breakfast, gym, class, then a tennis match tonight after class. This was pretty much his only time to himself, and he was looking forward to some peace and quiet.

He hates what the dining hall serves for breakfast most of the time– it's usually rubbery eggs or overly-sugary french toast, and Greyson isn't entirely a fan of either. He sticks to a bagel, grabs a couple slices of bacon, and a piece of fruit to add to his tray, stopping by the coffee bar to make himself a mug. He sits down in a heap in the back corner of the dining hall, slowly working on peeling at his orange, when the

chair across from him scrapes against the floor and a body plops down into it. Greyson glances up. His first reaction is to be dead-faced, to glare at the person until they leave.

Then he realizes it's Cameron.

"Morning," Cameron says, propping his chin on his hand. Greyson glances around them to do a headcount of people in the dining hall. There's maybe four other people here, none of which were anywhere near them. Cameron smirks. "Miss me?"

"Always," Greyson rolls his eyes, but cracks the smallest smile, taking a sip of his coffee. "This is daring for you."

"Ah, yes. How daring to be in an empty cafeteria with you," Cameron hums, nudging his foot under the table. "When's Rowan gone next?"

"Wish I knew. He disappears and comes back at random, I think," Greyson sighs. "I would love to have a solid few hours where I know it would be safe."

"Soon," Cameron insists, glancing over his shoulder, then behind Greyson, before standing and sliding into the chair beside him. Greyson smiles, snickering as Cameron takes the briefest of kisses. He pulls away and Greyson's face goes a burning bright red. "I'm gonna go get food. I will be right back."

"Go 'head."

Greyson watches as Cameron gets up and crosses to the other side of the cafeteria, out of eye sight. Greyson traces his lip gently with his fingers, trying to tattoo the feeling of Cameron's mouth into his soul. He smiles down at his coffee, shaking his head, and taking another swig.

"What's got you all chipper this morning?" Rowan asks, making Greyson jump. He blinks rapidly and checks over his shoulder. When did he get here? Did he see them? Did Cameron see him? "All smiley and shit… it's weird."

"My happiness is weird?" Greyson repeats as Rowan settles down across from him with a tray full of food. "Am I not allowed to be happy?"

"You weird me out with your mood swings. One minute you're sulking and grumpy and the next you're missing from the dorm on an

adventure you told no one about, and then you're back and you're… you're an entirely different person." Rowan picks up a forkful of rubber eggs and stuffs them in his mouth. "What's the plan for today?" He asks from behind his hand as he chews. Greyson grimaces and leans back from the disgusting sound.

"Well, it's last week of classes, so I'm finishing up some assignments, and I have a match tonight, so I'm a little busy today-"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Are you going to that party on Saturday for the end of the semester?" Rowan asks suddenly. Greyson furrows his eyebrows. "Because I want to go, and Luca wants to go, and I was thinking maybe you would go too so Luca wasn't on his own if I get pulled aside to-"

"No," Greyson scoffs, looking over Rowan's shoulder to see Cameron starting toward them, only to stop suddenly at the sight of their mutual best friend. He slows, casually approaching and nudging Rowan as he drops down into the seat beside him. Greyson avoids eye contact. "Not a chance."

"Why not?" Rowan whines. "He won't go if he doesn't have someone else there, and-"

"Why does it matter if he goes or not?" Greyson shot back. "Are you in love with him? I think you can handle a couple hours apart for some stupid party."

"You don't wanna go to the party?" Cameron asks, sounding more disappointed than he should've in front of Rowan. Greyson glances at him, then away, sitting up straighter. Both of them go rigid. Rowan glances at Cameron, patting him on the back, and then back to Greyson.

"No shot. I feel like everytime I go to one of those things, everything goes to shit. I hate going to them, and the people tend to suck, and I don't have fun. Why would I go?" Greyson avoids eye contact with the both of them. "Plus, I'm going home next week, and if I bring home a cold or something, my mother will skin me alive."

"You leave next week ?" Rowan groans. "What the hell, man. I thought we had a least a little bit of the break together-"

"We do. When I come back," Greyson reminds. "We got, like, a week in January. You said you wanted to go up north." His heart is hammering in his chest just thinking about going home. He misses his

Mum. He misses Phoebe. It will be good to go back. But it's always a soft spot with him. It's always harder than it should be. All these years, you'd think he'd get over it… "My exams end on Wednesday. I leave on Thursday."

"Christ, eager to leave, are you?" Cameron mutters.

"Didn't you just get back from a trip or something? The hell, man," Rowan sighs. "We have no time together whatsoever this year."

"Maybe next semester? I dunno man," Greyson shrugs. "It'll be fine. Listen– the parties are miserable, and you barely hang out with me at them anyways. I usually either get my ass kicked or threatened at the very least and I go home more miserable than I already was. You know I hate fraternities, and I especially hate crowds. It's a no."

"What did fraternities do to you?" Cameron scoffs, plucking a chunk of pineapple off his plate and popping it in his mouth.

"I dunno– got punched in the face a few times, was told to kill myself a lot, I've seen friends of mine get drugged," Greyson sends a pointed look at his partner, angrier than he should be. Cameron bites his cheek and looks down at his plate, picking at his nails, fumbling with his fork— anything but looking Greyson in the eyes. "I hate them. I don't just say it out of convenience, dude. I fucking hate them, I hate that it's buying your friends, I hate the false image of philanthropy and brotherhood, and I especially hate that they are often filled to the brim with douchebags."

"Alright, alright, settle down. It's too early in the morning for you guys to be bickering," Rowan interrupts, holding an arm out to Cameron before he can say something back. "It's fine. We'll… We'll just have to do something together before you leave for England. You fly out Thursday– how about Wednesday night we… we do something. I don't know. I'll think on it."

"We'll see," Greyson says simply, aggression still running through his veins. He realizes, when he looks down, he's out of coffee and pretty much finished his breakfast, too. "I have to go to the gym before classes start. I'll see you after my match tonight-"

"Can I at least come watch?!" Rowan calls out as Greyson stands to walk away. Greyson doesn't respond. He's not entirely sure how much he'd want Rowan there. Or Cameron, for that matter.

Classes are fine. So is the gym. Greyson is feeling totally ordinary other than his frustration from the morning. He's not sure what Cameron was doing in there– pestering him about topics that so clearly make him uncomfortable, squirmy, and angry. Of course he hates fraternities– why wouldn't he?! He's been given reason after reason to be uncomfortable, and quite honestly, so has Cameron.

His morning of solitude went to waste, and his day was filled with tasks. He went to his tennis match tense, rigid, and ready to get out some aggression.

It's his turn to serve again. He bounces the tennis ball against the rubbery court a few times, training his eyes to follow the motions. He's winning by a landslide– 30-love– and they're in their last set. He honestly doesn't like serving. He prefers serving in volleyball. Tennis serves distract him; he almost always loses track of the ball whilst it flies, when in comparison, he has a very easy time serving the volleyball and not losing it with the scale of the ball-to-person ratio. Even if he did lose the ball, it wouldn't be that big of a deal with a team around him to carry.

He tosses the ball up, and at the perfect moment, he swung his racket. The ball wizzes across the court, and Greyson hears the impact of it against the other person's racket. He searches the space and stumbles in the direction of where it was returned, barely sliding into the space in time to catch it with the racket in return. Back, and forth, and back again. Even in the cold December of Rhode Island, he's sweating under a slowly setting sun. In Greyson's honest opinion: the sport is quite possibly one of the most boring to watch, and even more boring to play. Hit, hit, hit. He might as well play ping pong.

He smacks the tennis ball across the court, watching it bounce, and his opponent fail to catch it. Greyson exhales, swiping a hand through his hair and pacing. He takes a sip of water quickly, his coach clapping and reminding him he was doing good. 40-love. It didn't feel good. At some point, it kinda feels like bullying the poor soul on the other end of the court.

Sat on the other side of the fence, among a thin crowd, is four people Greyson hadn't expected to see today. His three best friends and Cameron all sat together, cheering him on alongside his teammates who stuck around after their match or were waiting for theirs coming up. Greyson offers a half smile and a small wave, only to turn around and return to the court.

His opponent serves underhanded, directly at Greyson. So direct that he needs to sidestep as to get it in time. Thunk, thunk, thunk, the ball bounces from the racket to the court to the other racket and back. Over and over again, until the rhythm matches their racing hearts. Even in his easiest games, Greyson must say, it makes for a good work out.

He swung, and he watches the ball bounce, and he watches his opponent swing and miss, and just like that, the game is called. Greyson reigns victorious, and his opponent can go home and bask in the embarrassment of losing entirely.

“Can’t tell if that was a good one on you, or if he just wasn’t trying,” his teammate scoffs. Greyson smirks to himself, bouncing the ball against the ground again, just to hear the rather satisfying clunk of felted ball against tough matte rubber.

“Little bit of both? Can’t a guy be good against someone who isn’t?”

“Yeah, yeah. You got a big head,” his teammate grunts and jokingly shoulders Greyson away. “You here for next week’s match?”

“Nope. Got a by until the new year,” Greyson hums, swigging his water again.

“Righty, then if I don’t see you, have a Merry Christmas. Goin’ home to your parents? Bet they’re excited to see you-”

Greyson amuses the conversation for another few cheesy lines before walking away, dropping off his gear at his travel bag. His coach congratulates him on the win, wishing him a good holiday season. He rustles his hair with his hands and marches over to the bench where his friends were hooting and hollering like a group of men trying to catcall a woman.

“Aye, aye,” Greyson waves them off as he plops down in front of Santiago, rolling his eyes as they all comment on his stellar performance and how shitty the other guy was.

“--y’know, it was starting to make me sad. I felt bad for the guy. You couldn’t have let him get one point?” Rowan asks with a laugh, nudging him. “You’re a tank, man.”

“Sure,” Greyson shrugs, shaking his head as he switches his shoes from the ones he wears specifically to play to some regular-ol-converse. “It’s tennis, but I’ll take it.”

“C’mon now, it still takes skill! You’d kick our ass any day,” Luca jostles him. “You’re being humble. No need. You’re allowed to be impressed with yourself.”

“When the one thing you’re good at is known for being one of the most boring games in the world, it’s a little less impressive,” Greyson chuckles to himself, tying his shoes and glancing up, making eye contact with his boyfriend. His face gets hot just thinking about the word. He looks down again before he gets caught looking for too long.

“At least it’s not golf.”

“At least it’s not golf,” Greyson confirms with a nod. He wipes his sweaty hands on his pants and offers his friends a small smile. “Thanks for stopping by.”

It was incredibly awkward that you came.

“Of course!” Luca throws an arm around him. “You show up to everyones games every once in a while. It’s only fair that we saw at least one of yours…”

Greyson nods to himself, but all he thinks of is Wesley, who played every sport under the sun. Their one excuse to leave the house: sports. Wesley, who played rugby, and football, and swam, and everything else. Wesley, who was the star of the family, who earned every shred of attention a kid could want. Wesley, who went to maybe one of Greyson’s volleyball games, and showed up to a handful of tennis matches, only to complain to Mum that they shouldn’t have, because it was too boring.

The group drift off the court and to the sports building, and Greyson splits away to duck into the locker room to pack up his belongings and change. The crew of four wait in the parking lot for him, chatting aimlessly about the match. Cameron leans against his car, reminiscing on last week when he and Greyson spent days together in the front seats, laughing, flirting, in peaceful harmony. Across from him is Rowan’s car, which Luca, Santiago, and Rowan all took to the court together. Rowan’s been spending more and more time with the pair of roommates— with Luca— and Cameron isn’t entirely sure of what he thinks about it.

“That serve was actually really cool, in the first game there? Like— bam! I thought he was gonna take the other guys’ head off!” Rowan laughs.

“No but the way he had to dive in the second game? I thought for sure he was gonna face plant. How the hell is he that coordinated when playing tennis but trips over himself in the hallway?” Santiago responds.

“I need to pee,” Cameron proclaims, interrupting them. They nod and wave him off, and Cameron backtracks toward the sports building, and into the men's locker room.

It’s dead silent in there. It’s nothing like the football locker rooms. It doesn’t reek of sweat and piss, and its not filled with slurs grafitti’d onto the walls, and it looks, for the most part… clean.

Greyson is sat on a bench in the last cubicle of lockers on his phone, tracing a hand over the back of his neck. Cameron leans against the lockers and surveys him for a long few moments. He looks tired. Worn out by a long day of being stuck in his head.

“Staring is considered rude in most communities. Including mine,” Greyson mutters, running that hand that rubbed his neck along his face, then back to his neck. Cameron inches closer and slowly sits down beside him, resting his chin on Greyson’s shoulder. Cameron’s fingers, delicately, mindlessly, trace up Greyson’s spine. “What?”

“What’s wrong?” Cameron murmurs. Greyson doesn’t respond. Cameron looks at Greyson’s phone, seeing him text the groupchat with the five of them all in it.

***Greyson** : you guys head out. I got pulled into a meeting with my coach.*

Cameron touches his lips to Greyson’s shoulder, and he sighs.

“You’re avoiding us,” Cameron states.

“Maybe I am,” Greyson murmurs. Their phones buzz simultaneously.

***Rowan** : kk. Cameron is in the bathroom but we’re headed out to get dinner. If either of you wanna tag along, you’re welcome to. We’ll be at Luxe.*

“I don’t know. Just… you know. Going home can be weird. Already going back to that old Greyson, ready for the Clorox-Hurricane that is my mother,” Greyson cracks a tired smile. “And I’m… I’m kinda ready for this semester to be done. It’s been too much. I’m ready for a break.”

“Have I been too much?” Cameron asks softly, not pulling away. Greyson leans his head atop of Camerons, reaching for his hand. “You can be honest. I’ll understand.”

“I think you’re the only thing that’s felt right so far,” Greyson whispers back. Cameron held his breath, pressing another kiss to his shoulder. “I think… I think my dorm is open for a little while. And… and I could use some you-time. You wanna come?”

“I would love to,” Cameron says back, closing his eyes and resting against his partner.

Greyson and Cameron drive to the dorms together. Greyson spends the drive in Cameron’s car, fiddling with his fingers, staring out the window, lost in his thoughts. Lost in it all. Between all the fights, all the drama of this semester… he’s ready to call it quits. He’s ready for some time off.

But he wasn’t lying, either: Cameron wasn’t too much. Not lately, at least. There was a time Greyson thought any part of him was too much, and now, Greyson wonders if he will ever get enough. Call it puppy love, call it the honeymoon phase, but for once, something is right with the world.

When they get to the dorm, they have to enter quietly and without being noticed. Cameron walks lazily behind Greyson (though, Greyson knows exactly why he chose to walk behind him) and Greyson opens up the dorm for them both, hanging his bag and kicking his shoes aside.

Cameron knows the drill by now. Shoes off and to the side, don’t touch anything unless told he can, and otherwise, sit quietly at Greyson’s desk. Don’t bother him. For some reason, while the instructions almost remind him of the bitchy math teacher he had in ninth grade, he is incredibly enamored by the way Greyson takes charge and demands control.

Greyson pulls the quarter-zip jacket off himself by the neckline, making the shirt underneath pull upwards too, exposing his back. Cameron watches with a small smile as his partner strips off his clothes from tennis— his shirt was next to go (thank god) .

“I appreciate you keeping quiet about everything right now,” Cameron says softly while Greyson’s back is turned. “It won’t be forever. Just… just long enough to get everything sorted out, y’know?”

“I get it,” Greyson exhales, tossing his top layers into the laundry and shuffling over to his wardrobe to pull out fresh clothes. He glances at Cameron and cracks a sad smile. “I guess it makes sense. You don’t have the best people around you most of the time. I don’t mind, if it keeps you safe.”

“Keeps both of us safe,” Cameron comments, reaching out for his partner. Greyson sets the clean clothes on the desk behind Cameron and takes his hand, letting him pull Greyson to stand between his knees. “And… and while I appreciate you keeping this side of things quiet… that doesn’t mean we have to do the whole… hating each other thing. We can… we can be friendly. We can like each other.”

“I know…” Greyson furrows his eyebrows.

“Do you?” Cameron frowns. “Because… this morning you were really leaning back into that whole… enemies thing. It felt like a bit much for a cover up.”

“That wasn’t a cover up, Cam,” Greyson says back, pulling away. Cameron’s shoulders fall. “I…I was telling the truth this morning. I hate fraternities. I hate the parties. I don’t want anything to do with any of it. That… that wasn’t me covering for you. It was me telling Rowan the truth.”

“But Bryce and Aiden-“

“It’s not about Bryce and Aiden, Cameron!” Greyson says with an incredulous laugh. “It’s never been about Bryce and Aiden. Hell— it’s never been about any of your frat-bros. It’s about me feeling like the weak 6th year kid surrounded by year 11 bullies in the locker room after sports. Its-it’s about getting shoved into lockers, and-and getting kicked to the ground, and having no idea who I can trust…”

Cameron flickers his attention between Greyson’s eyes with growing concern. He stands, and Greyson backs up instinctively. Cameron takes another step closer, and the shuffle continues, until Greyson has his back to a wall, looking down at the floor, and Cameron is stood toe to toe with him, desperate for his attention.

“What are you stressed about?” Cameron asks quietly. Greyson stubbornly keeps his stare directed to the floor. Cameron reaches, delicately tracing the hairline upon the back of his neck, making Greyson’s eyes fall closed and his posture relax. “Am I making things worse for you right now?”

“No,” Greyson forces out, fighting the relaxation that comes with Cameron’s touch by gritting his teeth.

Finally, he looks up.

Browns mix with greens to make a beautiful Earthy complexion between them. They create eons and eons of life and vitality in a gaze alone. On a knife edge, Greyson both wants to lean into Cameron’s palm, let him carry the weight of his problems and his fears, and he wants to push away, to retreat into the safety of solitude.

“Unfortunately, you make things annoyingly better,” Greyson whispers with a tremor in his tone. Cameron cracks that stupid smirk that makes Greyson want to smack him and kiss him, all at the same time. “I hate you.”

“I love to be hated by you,” Cameron murmurs back. Greyson’s heart is skipping out of his chest, and he grabs a fistful of Cameron’s shirt, winding it up in his hand and yanking him down to kiss him. Cameron snickers into the kiss as Greyson demands not just attention and affection, but complete control.

“They’re gone for at least an hour. Take your stupid clothes off.”

“Yessir,” Cameron laughs, but Greyson glares at him. “You’re cute when you’re angry.”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s the goal.”

Cameron pulls his shirt off in one swift motion, neatly draping it over the back of Greyson’s desk chair. Greyson grabs him for another kiss, walking Cameron backwards to Greyson’s bed. Cameron pulls on his partner’s hips, and Greyson places his knees on either side of Cameron, not breaking their kiss.

Cameron’s gentle touch resumes. Tracing over the dimples in Greyson’s lower back, along his waist, up his spine and along his shoulders, only to trace back down again. It’s hard to keep his *annoyed* act up. No— correction. It’s impossible. Greyson holds Cameron’s face with shaky hands and a wavering breath passing from his lips. His forehead touches against Cameron’s, and his eyes fall closed.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Cameron whispers in the break of kisses and intimacy. He keeps tracing Greyson’s back, as an ever-

present reminder that he's here. "At the parties, or…or elsewhere. Whatever happens, I will make sure you're safe."

"Like you did last time?" Greyson exhales. Cameron frowns. He wishes he remembers the last time. He wishes he knew what happened. He wishes he was present, and not just physically. "That wasn't fair. I'm sorry. It-It was just… it was rough, and I don't want to do it again. I don't want to keep doing it. I don't like the crowd that turns up, and in all honesty, I don't like the energy. The only good part is you."

"That is the first nice thing you have said to me all day," Cameron says to lighten the mood.

"It'll be the last, too. Shut up and kiss me again."

"Yessir."

Chapter End Notes

Idk why I cant seem to get chapters out quicker yall i have had an abundance of time i'm just lazy sorry LMFAOO

Anyways hi i hope the new year is treating you well. Have a subpar chapter— the next ones will be GOOD. Happy Monday.

Until next time!
hayl (hayloftown on twitter)

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Light at the end of the tunnel.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson wishes that was the last he heard about the stupid party on Saturday night.

For the rest of the week, they all asked him, over and over again. Rowan, every time they were alone together (and especially when they were in a group), would practically get on his knees and beg. He would make promises he couldn't keep— *I'll make sure you're safe. I won't leave your side. We'll only stay for an hour.* Greyson had a harder and harder time telling him *'no'* . Cameron, too, was relentless. In their quiet moments of solitude, whether it be breakfast, or in empty stairwells, or in the study room in the library where they would make out and flirt instead of do their homework, he would always quietly slip in a ' *and if you go to the party, we can-* '. He didn't ask, per say. Mostly offered. Mentioned plans that they could carry out should Greyson attend, and to be honest: it was all very tempting. Wiggle through the crowd long enough to get to Cameron's bedroom, hide away in there for the night? Greyson liked the sound of that.

The worst, though, was when Luca came up to ask.

"Please!" Luca cries out, dropping his belongings on the floor as he enters Greyson's room. Cameron was headed over soon— Greyson was under the impression that Luca and Rowan were spending the afternoon together today. Greyson looks up and frowns.

"What?"

"Please go to the party!" Luca begs, flinging his arms around Greyson's shoulders, dangling off them limply. "Please! Please please please! I'll do anything! I'll do your laundry for a month. I'll-I'll submit your finals for you. I'll scrub the bathroom with my own toothbrush."

"Luca," Greyson sighs, sitting back and running a hand over his face. "That's, what, tomorrow night? I already said no. I'm sticking to my

word.”

“Why do you want me to suffer?” Luca asks. “I beg of you, help me out here. I need this.”

“What could you possibly need out of a frat party?” Greyson asks back, raising his eyebrows and turning in his seat. Luca kicks his feet and frowns, mumbling something unintelligible. “Hm?”

“A drunk hookup?” Luca murmurs. Greyson scoffs. “I’m serious! We’re in college! It's supposed to be the time to try things out, be reckless, date people for the hell of it- I need you to be my wingman! I need you to make it happen.”

“Me?” Greyson rolls his eyes. “Because I’m the sex-extraorindar.”

“No, because you’re Rowan’s roommate and best friend,” Luca whisper-shouts, shuffling over and sitting on the floor in front of Greyson. Greyson narrows his eyes at him. “I like him, Greyson. *Like him* like him. And-and I think… I think we might get it to work. But I can’t just… I can’t just waltz up to him and steal him from the crowd.”

“Yes you can,” Greyson says back, looking back to his homework.

“No, I can’t. You know how popular he is. It’s like writing ‘ *punch me* ’ on my forehead.”

“Popularity is a myth in college, first off,” Greyson interrupts. “Secondly, you absolutely can and should just… grab him and go. It’s possible. It’s actually kinda easy. You play your cards right and no one will even notice you left.”

Luca stares at Greyson with a blank expression. Greyson looks up again, raising his eyebrows.

“Who?”

“What?” Greyson shifts in his seat.

“Who did you hook up with?” Luca asks. “You’ve done it. You hooked up with one of them. That's why you don’t want to go to the party. You little whore! You hooked up with a frat brother!”

“I did not! And will you shut up!” Greyson hisses.

“You absolutely did!” Luca stands again, but lowers his tone. “You hooked up with one of the big names. Drunkenly or not, you did it.

You planned it out and executed it perfectly and that's why you think I have a shot! You motherfucker— I cannot believe you didn't tell us this. When Santiago finds out-"

"Shut up!" Greyson hisses. "Santiago won't find out because there's nothing to find out. Nothing's happening. And if there was something happening, you would keep your mouth shut like a good friend who doesn't want to out anyone-"

"Oh my god," Luca laughs in amazement. "I am so proud of you. You hooked up with someone. No way."

"Luca."

"Greyson," Luca looks at him wide eyed. At the meeting of Greyson's panicked expression, though, Luca calms himself. "Fine. I won't say a word. But you need to at least say who, right? Spare me the pain of being curious all by my lonesome?"

" *Luca* -"

Luca's eyes drift upwards, past Greyson, and he breaks out in a small smile. Greyson's shoulders tense.

"Nevermind. See you later," Luca says, patting Greyson's shoulder. "'Scuse me-"

"You know where Rowan is?" Cameron's voice asks Luca in an effort to cover.

"Nope!" Luca lies, skipping away.

Greyson's face is a burning shade of red, and he groans, putting his head against the desk. Cameron enters, closing the door behind him.

"What was that about?" Cameron asks.

"Nothing important," Greyson murmurs. "Just… asking me to go to the party again."

"I thought he was gonna be on that date with Ro…" Cameron's hands slide over Greyson's shoulders, over his back. "And the dorm would be empty."

"It is," Greyson says back, unable to contain his smile, unable to remain frustrated, as Cameron tips his face into Greyson's neck to start leaving little kisses. "Cameron…"

“Double check with Rowan,” Cameron murmurs before nipping at Greyson’s skin. Greyson grabs his phone in a hurry to text his friend.

Greyson: *when u coming home tonight ?*

Greyson’s eyes flutter, and he leans back into the chair, into Cameron’s chest, as Cameron’s hands trace his body and his mouth explores the base of his neck, where it meets his shoulder. He pulls on the collar to make more room. Cameron lets out a breathy chuckle.

Rowan *: pretty late. Gonna go out for dinner. Want anything?*

Greyson throws his phone aside and lunges to his feet, tackling Cameron onto his bed. The two laugh and kiss and strip until they are their entire natural selves, cooperating for total peace, harmony, and intimacy.

Saturday morning, Greyson was still not free from their pestering and begging.

The five of them got breakfast together. Greyson sat across from Cameron, subtly nudging his knees every few minutes, and they all talked over one another until their ears were ringing. Santiago was talking about going on a road trip over the break— he wanted to see just how far he could drive before he got bored and had to turn around. Luca was talking about what they should do before Greyson leaves next week (and subtly sneaking in an offer for Greyson to come to the party). Rowan was more outright with it.

“Nothing’s even gonna happen, dude! Just- just go. Don’t be a party pooper,” Rowan whines.

“We’re still on this?” Santiago huffs. “What’s the big deal, anyways? It’s a party.”

“Thank you!” Greyson exclaims, reaching over to his bestest, longest friend here at the university. “Thank you. About damn time someone agreed with me.”

“It’s not fun without you guys,” Luca says back. “It’s gonna be dead without someone interesting. It gets boring after a while of seeing the same football jocks take body shots off random girls.”

“Hey-“ Cameron scowls. “I don’t-“

“I take perfectly normal shots, thank you very much,” Rowan says pointedly.

“Okay, well… don’t go then?” Santiago says, like it’s obvious. “Greyson and I both don’t go to these things because most of the time they’re cringe and loud for no good reason. The best that comes of it is free alcohol.”

“Are you turning up free alcohol?” Luca raises his eyebrows. “I hardly know you anymore.”

“I’m just saying,” Santiago emphasizes, gesturing to Greyson. “ *We* will be having plenty of fun tonight. You are more than welcome to join us on our fun-filled night, free of assholes or toilets that haven’t been cleaned since the fraternity was built.”

“Yeah!” Greyson nods emphatically, grinning. “Santiago, would you like to go out tonight? Maybe hit the city? Bar-hopping?”

“I would love to, Greyson,” Santiago agrees. “This is why we get along so well.”

“Ditto.”

The remaining three groan, realizing any chances of dragging them out to party tonight was lost entirely. Greyson smirks to himself and sips his coffee, proud to know that he has officially won.

The morning continues with time at the rec center, featuring Luca and Greyson jumping in on a volleyball game, and Santiago successfully protecting Greyson from every offhand comment about having time to “change his mind”. Luca realizes finally, he has lost.

“Well, you and Rowan are more than welcome to join us on our escapade this evening,” Greyson states with a smirk as he and Luca practice hitting the ball back and forth to one another. Santiago jumps in when they are dangerously close to letting it hit the ground. “Plenty of drinking, plenty of fun. Santiago can stay the night in my dorm if it keeps you boys happy.”

“Excuse me?” Santiago scoffs. “I would rather choke than spend the night in your clean-freak bedroom. Especially if you might end up having your special guest over, too.”

“What special guest?” Greyson recoils, looking at Santiago, then Luca. “Did you tell him?!”

“No! I’ve been silent!” Luca defends.

“Tell me what?” Santiago’s eyes widen. “No- no, I was— I was making a reference to the fact that you always have your door closed when Rowan wasn’t home. I was making fun of you. What didn’t you tell me?”

“Nothing,” Greyson bumps the ball before it hits the ground. Santiago almost gets hit in the face with it, saved at the last second by Luca. “Nothing.”

“I was making fun of you for being a virgin and never having a social life, and you’re telling me there is a real reason you close the door? Oh my God-“

“There’s no reason-“ Greyson stumbles to get the ball, keeping his eyes on the sky. “Nothing is happening. There is nothing.”

“You are awful at secrets, Greyson,” Luca laughs. “C’mon, share with him before he loses it.”

“There’s nothing to share!” Greyson goes to get the ball, but he misses. It bounces off into the abyss of the court, and Greyson’s hands rest on his hips in an effort to catch his breath. “It’s nothing you need to know about.”

“I can’t believe Greyson is seeing someone. *Greyson* . The same person who won’t let you sit on his bed in outside clothes,” Santiago laughs in amazement.

“Doesn’t need to worry about outside clothes when they’re not wearing any,” Luca nudges Santiago.

“Luca!”

“You think they take showers together? Do you find soap sexy? I’m so invested now.”

“Santiago!”

This is his nightmare. This, right here, right now, is the worst. Ever. He never wants to talk to any of them ever again. He never wants to face Cameron again, either. Fear pinches at his gut, realizing he is failing at the one thing Cameron asked of him so far. Barely two and a half weeks into dating, and Greyson is failing.

Greyson and Santiago went into the city alone that night.

They started with something easy for dinner. Picky foods, sat at a bar that Greyson washed the attendant wipe down moments prior, sipping down a drink and pestering one another.

“Is he good?” Santiago asks. “Like, on a scale of one to ten-“

“I’m not rating him,” Greyson rolls his eyes, plucking a chip off the basket and popping it in his mouth. “He’s plenty good.”

“Do I know him?” Santiago asks next. Greyson rolls his eyes. “Like, at all. Have I ever spoken to him? You bring some characters to the study groups, and that one DND match there were plenty of people I would consider your type. Maybe it’s that guy from the grocery-“

“Yes, you have met him at least once in your life,” Greyson sighs, giving in. Santiago breaks out in a grin.

“Who else knows about him?” Santiago props his chin on his hand, smirking.

“What is this, 20-questions?”

“Yes! I wanna know! As your best friend, I have the right to know about the kind of guys you find attractive. I-I don’t need to know his name, but I wanna know… y’know… is he cute? Is he in school? Is he out? Or are you his experiment? How serious is it?”

“I don’t know, Santiago,” Greyson groans. “I don’t know. It’s…it’s brand new. Whatever we are. Whatever it is. It’s new. I don’t even know his middle name yet, nevermind whether or not he wants to get married and have kids.”

There is a break of quiet between them, interluded by the music over the speakers that play overhead, as well as the murmuring chatter of the rest of the bar. It’s busy, but that’s what they get for going out on a Saturday night.

Santiago reaches over, placing a hand on Greyson’s shoulder. Greyson sighs, looking at his best friend with a tired expression.

“This is what I can tell you. He doesn’t want people to know just yet. Luca knows who it is, not because I told him, but because…” Greyson grimaces. “He kinda… put it together. Rowan doesn’t know. Not that I’m seeing someone, or who it is, or anything of the sort, and we’re

gonna keep it that way."

"Okay," Santiago nods, giving a small smile.

"Okay?"

"Okay." Santiago picks up his beer from the counter and tips it toward Greyson. "Cheers. Happy for you, man."

Greyson shakes his head, grabbing his own drink to meet in the middle. Cheers.

"But do you get turned on by soap?"

"Will you *please* -"

They're interrupted by the scrape of a chair on Greyson's other side, Luca plopping down beside them, and waving down the bartender to get a drink. Both Greyson and Santiago turn to face him with a mixture of surprise and interest, smiling at their friend who finally decided to join them.

"Was it that bad?" Greyson asks with a small smirk.

"Boring on your own," Luca shrugs, murmuring a thank you to the bartender when his cocktail got slid across the counter.

"And loverboy?" Greyson asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Who? Mine or yours?" He shot back. Greyson bites his cheek. "Both too busy to even remember I was there. It's fine. I could use a good night out with my guys, anyways…"

"Who needs them?" Santiago asks loudly, sloshing his beer toward Luca for another cheers. "Amiright?"

"Who needs them!"

Cameron offers his friend a sad smile, nodding and sipping his cup of water, beautifully disguised as a red solo cup full of liquor. In all honesty, he didn't plan on staying long tonight. Long enough to be seen. Long enough to interact, then dip. To Greyson's, or off into the abyss of night where there's no loud party music, he's not sure. He's

not drinking, though, knowing damn well he will be driving off in a matter of hours.

“You. You need them,” Cameron says back to his drunken friend, who has spent the past ten minutes grumbling about the lack of appearance by Greyson and Santiago, as well as the fact that he hasn’t seen Luca in over an hour and a half. “And that’s okay, Ro.”

“No!” Rowan whines, pouting. “I-I don’t wanna need them. I wanna be a big boy who isn’t in love with my roommate’s friend, and who doesn’t depend on my roommate for energy and vitality in my day.” Rowan blinks a few times and swigs his drink, frowning. “Y’know, the reason everyone hates Greyson is because he-he speaks the truth, and he is his real self, unapologetically. He’s an annoying piece of shit about it sometimes, but that’s what you guys’ problem is. You don’t like real people who can be real.”

“I don’t have a problem with him,” Cameron scoffs.

“‘F’course you do,” Rowan swallows another sip. “All you do is have issues with him. He annoys you this. He bothers you that. It’s never ending with you two. Like an old married couple. Jeez. You remind me of my parents.”

Cameron shakes his head with an amused smile, sipping more of his water, and eyeing his roommates as they pass by them with small laughs and pointed looks at Cameron in regards to Rowan. Rowan isn’t doing himself many favors tonight– all he’s talked about is Luca. Even before he started getting drunk, he was gushing to one of the guys about how soft Luca’s hair looks, and that he smells like lemongrass. And then he started drinking, and it only gets worse and worse. His eyes are so pretty, and he has soft hands, and when he smiles it’s like the entire room lights up– *blegh* . Cameron has never heard someone be so openly in love.

“Here,” Cameron says, turning to get Rowan a cup of water. “Sober up a bit.”

“Why?” Rowan whines. “I don’t wanna.”

“Because we’re gonna go get you to Luca so you can be his problem,” Cameron claps him on the shoulder. “And stop embarrassing yourself.”

“Is it embarrassing if it's true?” Rowan swoons. “How badly can it hurt you when it’s the truth? How much damage can it do?”

“Just… drink the damn water.”

With that, Cameron leaves his friend alone long enough to pace up the stairs and get some stuff ready to go to leave for the night. He brushes his teeth, because all he tastes are the greasy, bad nachos that one of his roommates made this afternoon, and the aftertaste of shitty stale chips. He also changes out of what he was wearing since this morning– part of him knows Greyson would make some kind of comment about not changing after the gym, or how he was around too many people in that shirt, and quite honestly– the other shirt-flannel-combo looked better on him anyways. And sure– maybe he fixed his hair a bit in the mirror, too. Is that so wrong?

Well, it is when Sam walks in on him trying to adjust himself to look a little better in the mirror, stopping short at the sight of him.

“...hey,” Sam says from the doorway. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No, I’m… I’m just leaving,” Cameron ruffles his hair one last time with a shrug.

“Leaving, like… the party,” Sam assumes. Cameron goes still. “You’re going to be with them, aren’t you?”

“Them?” Cameron repeats.

“You know exactly who I am talking about…” Sam says, looking over his shoulder, then taking a step in. He closes the door behind him. “Bryce and Aiden just walked in. I don’t know who invited them, or… or if Liam is coming, or what. But if you’re planning on leaving, I’d make it fast, and take Rowan with you before he gets his ass kicked.”

“I thought they went home-” Cameron furrows his eyebrows. “They got expelled-”

“I know, but-I-I guess they hung around town. I don’t know. But they’re here, and there will be trouble if you don’t get out, and get out fast. That’s why I came up here looking for you-”

“You just… knew I would be in our room?” Cameron raises an eyebrow. “Kinda creepy.”

“You can only hookup so many times in my bedroom before I notice, dude…” Sam shrugs. “I just… I’m trying to help you. Go. I’m not in the mood to mop up blood today.”

“Alright, alright,” Cameron says defensively. “I’m going.”

“Quick!”

“I’m going!” Cameron exclaims, ducking out of his room and headed down the stairs.

He scans the party for a few moments in search of his friend and the poor soul he’s deciding to bother now. Cameron wove through crowds and ducks under streamers until he finds Rowan, trying to pour himself another drink at the counter.

Wiggling through the wave of people, he grabs Rowan by the sleeve and starts rounding him toward the front door, toward their escape. Rowan drunkenly stumbles after him with a cheer, realizing that it was their time to leave.

“Can we go see him?”

“Yes, Rowan,” Cameron sighs, earning another cheer.

“Do you think he likes me?”

“Yes, Rowan…”

Rowan gets into Cameron's car and closes the door behind him. Cameron walks around the car, heavy shouldered, and glances up at the house.

Stood on the front steps, leaning against the railing, is Aiden and Bryce.

The trio share prolonged eye contact for a moment too long. Cameron knows he’s in trouble. He knows he’s dead to them. Alas, he… he doesn’t care. That part of him, that part of his life, is done. He isn’t going to waste his time being scared of big ol’ lugs who barely know how to tie their own shoes. He bites his cheek and ducks into his car. He watches Aiden lean over and mumble something to Bryce, and they both laugh.

Cameron drives away, not sparing them even a moment longer of his attention.

Rowan doesn’t shut up the entire drive. Cameron gives him water from the case that sits in his backseat, and slowly, as Cameron circles the area where the guys were hanging out, he sobers up enough to not

slur his words so heavily or look like he might pass out. His head rests against the window as Cameron luckily finds street parking and pulls into the spot, smiling to himself.

“What’s that look for?” Cameron asks.

“I love you, man…” Rowan murmurs. “Always takin’ care of me.”

“Well… you’d do it for any of us, too…” Cameron sighs, glancing at his phone and shooting Greyson a text. They sit in the car for a long few moments, only the speakers interrupting their silence. That is, of course, until Rowan continues.

“But for real,” Rowan blinks a few times. “You’re such a good guy. Any girl out there would be lucky to have you. I feel lucky to have you.”

“You went from gushing about Luca to being in love with me?” Cameron scoffs.

“Shut up,” Rowan pushes himself upright, swigging his water one more time. “Let's go see him. I wanna see him.”

“Alright, tiger. Let’s go.”

The two wander down the street into the last known location of where Santiago and Greyson suggested they might go. Rowan, in an instant, makes a beeline for Luca, plopping down at the counter beside him, smiling like a little boy about to open presents. Cameron shakes his head with a smile, sliding up to the bar with him.

“Don’t mind him. He’s been drinking,” Cameron announces to the group.

“I assumed, given the disheveled state,” Santiago mutters with a chuckle as Cameron takes the stool beside him. “Want a drink?”

“I’m driving,” Cameron waves off, glancing down the bar with a small smile, seeing Luca immediately so invested in his drunken companion who is so totally in love. “What did I miss?”

“Nothing yet. Just Luca whining about loverboy. Clearly he got over that grudge…” Santiago smirks at the two who were getting up and vacating their seats at the bar. The three watch them go with quiet giggles amongst themselves.

“Remind me to never let myself be that gross,” Cameron requests. “He’s like this… lost puppy whenever they’re apart for a prolonged period of time. I’m starting to think they hold hands at the urinals.”

“Ew,” Greyson grimaces and sips his drink.

“That is quite possibly the opposite of Greyson’s type. We were just talking about how he finds soap sexy,” Santiago jokes. Greyson elbows him. Cameron raises an eyebrow, smirking to himself.

“Yeah? Do tell.”

“No. No telling. We don’t talk about this,” Greyson threatens. “I will stab you with a fork.”

“Aye, aye,” Santiago defends. “I’m kidding. Mostly.”

“Go away,” Greyson whines. “Please. I beg of you. Go. I’ve dealt with you enough today.”

“Fine, I’m going. But just because I need to pee, and not at all because you told me to, idiot,” Santiago declares, standing. Greyson sticks his tongue out at him. Santiago flashes him a middle finger. Greyson smacks at him, and the boys break out into a truly brotherly bitch-fight as Santiago walks away and finally shuffles to the bathroom.

“How drunk are you?” Cameron asks, taking the water the bartender slid to him and sipping it. Greyson shrugs, drinking the last of his glass. “You were right.”

“Hmm?” Greyson glances up.

“Don’t make me say it again…” Cameron sighs, running a hand through his hair. “The party was lame. Boring without you. I spent the whole time babysitting Rowan, and I’m glad I did, because apparently Aiden and Bryce turned up to start some trouble. We got out before anything happened though.”

“You said that I was right,” Greyson snickers. “I was, wasn't I?”

“Shut up…” Cameron rolls his eyes. “It will never happen again.”

“Mhm,” Greyson smiles, sliding his glass to the bartender and requesting a new one. Cameron watches her mix up a drink special for him, eyeing them both with a little playful smile. She stirs the drink and slides it back to Greyson, who plucks it off the counter and stands.

“C’mon.”

“Where to?”

“Just trust me. C’mon.”

Cameron hesitates, but eventually gets up and follows. Greyson leads them through the crowded bar and up the stairs to the next level, which is more of a party scene. Then the next floor, and the next floor, until they are at the rooftop bar, which is considerably quieter.

There's a bartender, and the music doesn’t make it impossible to hear, and the cold weather must’ve scared off some patrons, because only a few groups lingered about. Cameron raises an eyebrow.

“What’s this for?”

“Some peace and quiet,” Greyson chuckles, shuffling over toward the building's edge and sinking down at a bench. Cameron follows tentatively.

He’s not the biggest fan of heights. But he is a big fan of Greyson. He sunk onto the bench, leaning against the arm, facing Greyson. Greyson, like a daredevil, leans against the railing, overlooking the city with a soft smile. He sips from his straw and glances at Cameron. His foot nudges Cameron’s.

“I’m glad you came,” Greyson hums. “And ditched those bitches.”

“Those bitches?” Cameron parrots. “You *are* drunk.”

“Only a teensy bit,” Greyson blushes, pinching his fingers together and squinting. “What's-it-to-ya.” Cameron laughs, shaking his head. “Don’t laugh at me. You’re supposed to be nice to me.”

“I’m not laughing at you,” Cameron reassures. “I’m laughing because of you.”

“Linguistics. Blegh,” Greyson grumbles with a stupid smile. “Doesn’t matter. You laughed in my face. It’s mean. You’re supposed to like me.”

“I do like you,” Cameron murmurs back, his voice heavy with truth and affection, diluting the alcohol that made Greyson’s head and heart so fuzzy. “I like you very much.”

“How much?”

“Very much,” Cameron insists.

“How much is very much?” Greyson mumbles. “A hundred?”

“Infinity,” Cameron hums, making Greyson’s eyes light up.

“That’s a lot more than a hundred…” Greyson murmurs. “And at the same time— a lot less. Hm. What even is infinity? Isn’t it kinda like zero? So much of anything really becomes nothing if you-“

“Shut up,” Cameron groans, leaning forward and stealing a kiss. Greyson jumps but leans into it after a moment, a hand sliding over the back of Cameron’s neck, weaving through the hair at the base of his head. Cameron is the warmth on an otherwise very cold rooftop bar, the heat that keeps him going. Greyson melts against him. Within a long few seconds, Cameron releases him. “Are you done now?” Greyson pulls away slightly, blinking his eyes open and thinking.

“I might need one more.”

“Okay. Just one,” Cameron negotiates, stealing one more kiss in the privacy of a quiet night.

They spend forever on that rooftop. The two of them, some gentle music, and a beautiful view. For Greyson, the skyline. For Cameron… well, let's just say he wasn’t keen on looking anywhere other than his counterpart.

Eventually, Greyson moves closer. Then closer still. Closer, until their legs are flush, and Greyson has to lean onto Cameron to look up at the sky. That didn’t stop him from looking up at the moon though, tired, and laughing, and maybe a little too touchy. Cameron couldn’t find it in him to care.

A drunken trio eventually stumbles up the stairs, making Cameron the only sober one of the group. They collapse onto the bench alongside Greyson and Cameron, making Greyson scoot ever closer. Though, Cameron won’t complain. Any excuse to touch, to be near Greyson, is a good one.

The drunken friends laugh and joke together. Sometimes, Greyson laughs so hard he falls backwards against Cameron’s chest. Cameron doesn’t think he’s ever seen his partner so bubbly, so contagiously happy, so carefree. Greyson smiles like all is right in the world. Perhaps, in this moment, he’s right. All is right. Everything is good. Cameron can’t find a single complaint.

Rowan, even seven drinks deep and swirling from drunkenness and romance, sees it. He watches as Greyson falls into a fit, and Cameron supports his weight without complaint. He watches as they make eye contact, and rather than three years worth of feuding, there is something else seen in them. Rowan doesn't know what it is. He doesn't know what has happened or why. But any reason to see his two favorite people happily coexisting is a good one. There is light at the end of the dark, treacherous tunnel that was once his friend-group.

Chapter End Notes

These boys are just terrible at secrets...

Anyways. Almost winter break time for them. Yknow what that means? ANGST!! WOOOOOOO. you know me and my love of angst.

It is only halfway through january and i have posted a total of five chapters between rbtl and sotd so i am proud of myself and hope to keep it up. that being said, it's my FINAL SEMESTER OF COLLEGE starting in two weeks so things might be a little slower while i finish up. i will try my best to still be consistent. as always, though-- i don't abandon fics. i will make sure this gets wrapped up with a pretty lil bow

until next time,
hayl (hayloftown on twitter)

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Didn't see it coming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the early morning of March 27th, 2012, a family of five sat at their kitchen table for the very last time, unknowingly so.

Mum cooked up a grand breakfast. It was just a Tuesday morning, but Greyson had some rather important exams that morning at school, and she insisted upon cooking up something special to start his day off right.

Eggs, overhard, just how Greyson likes them, and scrambled for Phoebe, who likes to eat just about anything her fat little toddler hands can grab a hold of. A full glass of orange juice for them each. Greyson opted for a coffee like the rest of the adults, too. Bacon. A heaping pile of bacon. Dad's favorite. Hash, and beans, and toast– you name it, it was on the table.

"This is del'cious, Alice. You 'e've out'un you'self," Dad says, his hands shaking as he brings a fork full of egg to his mouth.

He was tired this morning. He showered last night, which takes a lot out of a sick man, and he didn't sleep well last night between his hacking and spasming. Greyson recalls wincing every time he coughed. He didn't sleep well either. His nose has been too stuffy to sleep, and last night especially, he was scared to hear what had become of his Dad.

"Thank you, my love," Alice chirps, pressing a kiss to his bald head. "Wesley, what are you doing later today? I need help cleaning up the living room for the home nurse tomorrow."

"Why can't Greyson do it?" Wesley mutters, stuffing his mouth. Greyson eyes him, then his mother.

"I don't mind," Greyson shrugs.

"Thank you, dear, but it wouldn't kill your brother to help me out

around the house," Mum says, sending the eldest of the siblings a pointed look. "Until you are moved out and independent, you can help me clean."

Greyson glances at Dad, who looks at him. Dad sends his middle child a wink and then looks to the oldest Hampton child, opening his mouth to speak. Rather than words, what spills out is a cough.

Then another.

Then a fit.

Until he's doubled over and pink in the face, and he's out of breath from coughing. He does this sometimes. Chokes on his own throat and spittle. It's signs of the disease progressing, doctors say. Expect it.

They do. Mum runs a hand over his back, and they carry on with their conversation like normal. Greyson doesn't look away though. He still hasn't quite learned the ' *staring is rude* ' rule.

Dad grabs a napkin to hack into. He brings it to his mouth and lets the contents of his mouth and throat dribble out. Greyson watches the napkin soak through with red.

"Dad?" Greyson says quickly, standing up. All eyes turn. Mum gasps at the sight. "Dad, are you okay?"

"Wesley!" Mum shouts as Dad starts to go down. He's pale. He's sick. Soon, he's throwing up blood into a trash can Mum barely grabbed in time. Wesley grabs the home phone and dials 9-9-9. Greyson grabs Phoebe and stumbles away from the carnage.

It's a blur. Wesley's voice, explaining to the emergency services that Dad is already sick, and he's throwing up and coughing blood uncontrollably. Phoebe wails in fear and overstimulation as it gets louder and louder in their tiny house. Greyson hides behind the doorway to the kitchen, afraid of making eye contact with them. He's nauseous. He's scared.

He knows it's his fault.

Greyson and his siblings sit in the hospital room waiting for Dad, who had been taken away for a slew of scans, tests, and pokes. When they first arrived, he had to have his lungs drained. Mum is off somewhere waiting in the radiology wing. Phoebe only just fell asleep for her nap, and Greyson watches as the clock ticks past the end time for his exam

he never made it to.

“Do you think Dad’s gonna die?” Greyson asks his brother in a whisper. Wesley looked over at him in surprise.

“I dunno.”

“What will we do if he does?” Greyson asked next.

“The same thing we do when he’s alive,” Wesley murmurs. “Survive until we can get by.”

Greyson remembers thinking his brother was so incredibly profound, so wise, for such a statement. In reality, it was the most nihilistic comment that could come from his older brother in a time of sorrow.

It wasn’t until the next morning that they had the diagnosis– influenza and late stage pneumonia. They were all shocked to hear about that second part. Mum held Dad’s hand with a crushingly tight grip, watching him in shock.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she asked. Dad just looked up at her with a miserably sad smile and mouthed an apology. His eyelids were heavy. He hadn’t been sleeping well. His body was exhausted, the doctor said.

The kids go home that night to sleep and let Dad rest without the children keeping him awake. Wesley is in charge, Mum claims. He made pasta for dinner and put Phoebe to bed, and the boys stayed awake for a while in silence, watching the TV despite nothing good being on. Greyson sniffles and clears his throat, shifting uncomfortably, before excusing himself to bed.

“Will you call me out of school tomorrow morning?” Greyson asks quietly as he approaches the stairs.

“Yeah.”

“Thank you.”

It was their last civil conversation.

Greyson goes upstairs to brush his teeth and shower. The heat of the water makes his stuffy nose run and his chest feel less congested. He sleeps a little easier that night.

They return to the hospital first thing in the morning the next day.

Mum says it's not good. They walk in to the doctors and nurses consoling a sobbing Mum. Dad was heaving for breath despite not being awake. Wesley goes pale at the sight. Greyson immediately sits with his mother to console her. Mum falls into her son's shoulder and cries out her apologies, kissing his head, and holding him tight.

The doctors said they should say their goodbyes.

They each got some time alone with him. ' *Say all the things you never said* ' type of thing. Wesley went first. He spent maybe two hours in the room, talking to Dad. The rest of them milled about the hospital in hopes of keeping Phoebe entertained. When they returned, Wesley was reduced to tears and went to sit in the hall alone. Mum offered for Greyson to go next, but he was scared of being left alone. He asked for some time to think, first.

Every passing minute felt like torture. Dad was suffering. He was barely lucid. In his state, though, he still held Phoebe one last time, letting her sleep in his bed beside him.

Greyson never had the courage to say his goodbyes.

He laid with his head on Dad's arm that night, listening to him breathe. Dad, in his spurs of being awake, would reach up and fluff Greyson's hair, or rub his back. Greyson, in the quiet of night, let some guilty coughs slip. No one woke to them. Or, perhaps, they thought it was Dad.

It was barely four in the morning when Dad passed.

Greyson recalls standing in the bathroom as Mum walked his body down to the morgue, washing his hands raw, scrubbing all the way up to his elbows in an effort to cleanse himself. He was nauseous. He was scared. He hadn't cried yet– he didn't feel as though he deserved to.

It was his fault.

Greyson didn't know he had the flu. He didn't know it was that severe. He just… he thought he had a cold. He thought it was something normal. He kept his distance, but he didn't do the full quarantine. He didn't tell anyone.

And it killed him.

Dad's dead because of him.

They went home, and they sat in the living room together for a long time, processing. What do you do after your father dies? Watch TV? Call your friends? Go for a bike ride?

In Greyson's case, he throws up.

He only lasted a few minutes before he started getting sick. Mum followed him into the bathroom, rubbing his back and trying to soothe him. He shook like a leaf in the wind. He shook like his father did for all those years of disease progression.

Dad will never attend Greyson's wedding, or graduations, or meet his future partners. Dad will never see Greyson grow up into adulthood, never watch him get a grown up job, or raise a family. He will never get to be a grandpa.

When his stomach contents were emptied, Mum brought him some salt water to gargle, as well as some hot tea. He sat in the corner of the bathroom, back pressed against the cold wall, and tears racing down his cheeks. Everything hurts. He's overheating, and he's tired, and he misses his Dad already. He misses their dinners, and he misses Dad tucking him in as a kid, and he misses his stupid jokes.

He can hear whispering outside the bathroom doorway.

Mum and Wesley are talking– Mum is trying to get Wesley to quiet down, and Wesley is only getting louder, angrier, more aggressive. Greyson stares off at the wall ahead of him, bracing for impact.

"How can you possibly look past this?!" Wesley shouts. "He killed Dad! He got him sick! Years, Mum! *Years* , we have prepared for the worst case scenario. We all know what to do. He killed Dad and you're just letting him get away with it!"

"Wesley Wyatt, you leave him alone right now," Mum demands. "I understand you are struggling but you owe your brother some compassion at the very least-"

"I don't owe him shit!" Wesley spits, looking past Mum and into the bathroom where Greyson sat. "You hear me? I don't owe you shit, and you don't deserve it, either. You don't deserve my compassion, and you definitely don't deserve Mum's. You killed him! You did this to us!"

"I didn't mean to!" Greyson cried out, burying his face in his hands.

“You knew the rules! You knew what happened last time! You knew why we did things the way we did and you made the rest of us pay the price of your screw up!” Wesley shouts, tears racing down his cheeks. “You cost me a Dad! You took away any chance Phoebe had at knowing her Dad! You stole Mum’s husband from her! All because you’re this stupid, selfish, entitled fucking brat of a child-”

“I’m sorry!” Greyson sobbed.

“Bullshit!”

“Wesley! Stop!” Mum intervened, pushing her eldest away from the bathroom. “Go to your room. That’s quite enough.”

“I don’t think it is!”

“Either go to your room or get out of my house. This is not how we are spending the remainder of the day,” Mum threatens. Wesley’s jaw trembles, and the tears flow freely. “Today, we are grieving as a *family* . We are not pointing fingers and we are not fighting. Get out of your brother's face. Now.”

Wesley stomped off up the stairs into the solitude of his bedroom, the door slamming behind him.

Mum turns to face her younger son in the bathroom. Greyson was taken over by panic. His face, buried in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably. Mum kneels at his side, but Greyson winces away. Her son cries out to not be touched, to save his mother from contracting the same bug that killed his father, but it didn’t matter. Mum wound him up in a tight embrace, stroking his hair delicately, murmuring assurances that everything will be okay.

It’s not true, of course. How could it ever be okay, now that Dad is dead? How could anything be right ever again?

But Mum promised. And she always keeps her promises.

Greyson thinks about that every time he goes home.

Not just the promise, but the fight. The *fights* , he supposes. Plural. It would be silly to think Wesley and Greyson just made up after that. God no. The boys could never be left alone together after that. For a while, it was just Wesley, interrogating Greyson on why he did what he did. And then Greyson got older, more stoney, and started fighting back. And then it wasn’t just about Dad anymore. It was about who

gets Phoebe her juice, and it was about who will carry in the groceries, and it was names and bitchfights at the dinner table, and that one time they accidentally got left alone in the same room during Christmas at grandma's, and the two broke out into a brawl.

He always gets filled with this uncomfortable dread when he goes home. Being back in the house where it all happened can be a bit of a bittersweet feeling. It's nice to feel Dad's presence again, to see all the photos, and to sit in his armchair, and to tell stories. But it can also sometimes be a bit much…

Greyson sends Cameron a text as the train pulls to a stop at his stop, letting his partner know he was safely back in his hometown. He was jetlagged and exhausted beyond belief from a long flight, layover, then second flight. It's almost dinner time, meanwhile he left Rhode Island around 7:30PM yesterday.

The stop isn't far from home— a walk he's done plenty of times. He walks the neighborhood, past barking dogs and examining the neighborhood changes. The Crowley's have put up a fence, and the Smith's painted their brick a hideous tan, and Mr. Werschberger was still sitting outside on his rocking chair as always, giving Greyson a wave as he passed.

He strolls up the front steps of the house, taking a deep breath. Phoebe's bike is propped against the stairs with a helmet hung from the handlebars. Dad's tree, which they planted a few weeks after his passing, is getting amazingly tall in the front yard, though it was barren for the winter. The front steps were slightly slippery from ice.

Greyson opens the door to his mother's house, kicking off his shoes upon entrance. He shuts the door behind him, looking around at the entryway he grew up in, where all these stupid rituals began. Hand sanitizer on the table just next to the door as well as Clorox wipes. Sickeningly, there's also a photo of Dad there with an unlit candle beside it. A laundry basket sits next to the stairs with clean clothes. Everything is perfectly orderly. Greyson feels like he's walking into a museum.

"Mum?" Greyson calls out. "Mum? I'm home…"

"Grey?" Mum calls back from the kitchen. She pokes her head into the entryway and beams. "Oh, honey! Hello! Welcome home! Go- go shower so I can squeeze you already! Don't worry about your bags. I'll wipe them down and get them to your room. I have some fresh

laundry in the bathroom for you."

Old habits never die.

Mum stays on the opposite end of the entryway from him, not daring to get any closer. Greyson gives her a sad smile and nods, parting ways to the upstairs bathroom for a shower as she instructed.

Sure enough, a fresh pair of clothes sit on the counter in the bathroom, a sticky note on top labeled with his name. Greyson is sickened by the smell of chemicals, like Mum took bleach and a toothbrush and scrubbed every crevice of the room until the bristles were nothing but nubs and her hands were blistered.

He showers under scalding hot water, wondering how far he's drifted from himself to have this feel foreign. He's gotten far too comfortable this past semester, going out, doing things, seeing people, and not obsessing over his cleanliness. This feels wrong, and it feels wrong that it feels wrong.

There was once a time that this felt completely normal. To come home, to have Mum wipe down his belongings, to shower for a minimum of 15 minutes, washing and rinsing twice with antibacterial soap. He used to do this daily, until his skin would crack from being so dry, and his backpack was bleached from chemicals.

He gets dressed in the clothes Mum set out for him. It's just some joggers and what looks like one of Dad's old uni-shirts. He ruffles his hair with a towel and drops it in a hamper, glancing at his reflection in the mirror. He looks like his 14 year old self. Small. Helpless. Alone.

His eyes catch a glint of light on the counter. He looks down and frowns.

An old pair of glasses sit next to the sink. One of the pairs he left behind in the move. He only brought the one pair to America, not anticipating wearing them ever. He wonders if Mum knew he would come home without wearing them. He wonders if she set them out, knowing he didn't bring a pair with him.

He abandons the spectacles on the counter and returns downstairs. Mum was setting the table for dinner. Four plates. Greyson deflates slightly. Wes is coming.

"Oh, honey…" Mum coos when she realized he was there, turning to

take him into a firm hug. “I missed you so much. Welcome home.”

“Hi Mumma,” Greyson exhales, hugging her back. “I miss you too.” He pulls away and goes to gather silverware, eyeing the window to the empty backyard. “Where’s Pheebs?”

“Oh, she’s at a friend's house. Wesley is out picking her up now,” Mum hums, returning to the stove to grab a pot and a potholder to bring to the table.

Right on cue, the front door opens, and Greyson’s siblings spill through. Shoes off, hand sanitizer, and Phoebe grabs a change of clothes from the hamper at the bottom of the stairs, going straight for the downstairs bathroom. Wesley walks into the kitchen, still using the sanitizer like a lotion, and sinks down at his spot at the table. The brothers make eye contact, and Greyson looks away first.

Phoebe comes out of the bathroom rather fast— she definitely hadn’t showered, and when she pokes her head into the kitchen, she runs straight toward Greyson. Greyson releases any of his tension, any of his worries, and encapsulates his little sister in the tightest possible hug, lifting her from her feet and holding on tight. She reaches up to play with his hair, twirling a piece of the slightly damp mop with her fingers.

“You wouldn’t believe what me and Lilly played today after school. She-She has this absolutely massive Barbie house, like, taller than the whole room, it goes all the way to space I think-”

Greyson nods, smiling as his little sister rambles on and on about a game Greyson wouldn’t care about if it wasn’t his sister talking about it. Her happiness is infectious as the flu. It spreads from person to person. Wesley and Greyson make eye contact again, and for the first time in too long, they share a smile. An awkward one, but a smile nonetheless.

They all sit around the same dining table they sat at for years on end together, with the same empty chair there has been for the past six years. Mum talks about what she’s been doing around the house– she’s turning the basement into a den, and she’s talking about making the office into a library space, and she slips in a mention of possibly turning either Greyson or Wesley’s room into a play space for Phoebe…

“Of course, only if you boys are alright with that-” Mum offers, taking a bite of her food.

“Taking over my room?” Wesley asks hesitantly.

“Go for it,” Greyson says without thinking, scooping a forkful of rice up. He goes to take a bite to find both his Mum and brother looking at him. “I mean… I’m sure I can just… sleep on the couch when I come home for the holidays. It’s not a big worry for me-”

“I was thinking I would most likely take Wes’s, because… you know, when you come home after college, I want you to still have a warm bed at night,” Mum explains, eyeing the brothers. “But if Wesley doesn’t mind you taking his room-”

“You don’t need to worry about it,” Greyson insists. “I’ll have something arranged after college.”

“Oh,” Mum says in surprise. “Who are you thinking of staying with? Have you kept in touch with some secondary school mates?”

“No,” Greyson scoffs. “No. I never really had a chance to make any friends back then. I have ten years on my VISA. I’ll probably stay in America.”

Mum’s fork clatters. Wesley snorts, looking anywhere but the mother-son duo. Silence falls over the dining table, like someone just died. Mum looks at her middle child incredulously. Greyson looks up, raising an eyebrow.

“C’mon, Mum… it was a lot of work getting into Brown, and getting the VISA, and I have people over there who-”

“I was perfectly fine with you having friends, and I am happy you’re extending yourself, but this is a bit much, Greyson,” Mum says. “You can’t seriously be considering being across the world from us forever, can you?”

“Who said anything about forever?” Greyson asks back. “I said my VISA lasts ten years, and I’m already three years in. I-I have to reapply around year 8 or 9, and I’m not even sure I will reapply. I’m just saying… I might as well stay my welcome and then decide from there-”

“Have you been keeping in touch with Doctor Rowland? I need– I need you to make an appointment while you’re here. This is too reckless. This is ridiculous-” Mum swiftly stands and grabs her plate to clear her place. “Put your dishes in the dishwasher when you're done. I need a moment.”

Greyson watches, aghast as his mother dumps her plate in the dishwasher without pre-washing it, turning to march into the living room. She stops short and whirls around, pointing her finger at Greyson.

“And wear your glasses, will you? I spent perfectly good money on you so you could see, and it’s wasting away on that bathroom counter. Your father would never waste my time and money like that.”

Greyson recoils, and Mum marches off.

Wesley, Phoebe, and Greyson sit at the table for a long moment, and Wesley quietly snickers to himself, shaking his head. Greyson pokes at his meal for a moment, confused, startled, and uncertain as to what could have possibly just happened to make that kind of an implosion.

“You really fucked it this time,” Wes murmurs, sipping his soda.

“Shut the fuck up, Wes,” Greyson spits, standing and doing exactly as his mother asked– abandoning his plate in the dishwasher, and going upstairs to get those stupid fucking glasses.

The four remaining members of the group sit in Rowan’s dorm, unsettled by the lack of tension about cleanliness and preservation. Rowan and Luca sat on Rowan’s bed, Luca sprawled across Rowan’s lap without care, scrolling through his phone, Santiago sitting on Greyson’s stripped mattress, and Cameron at Greyson’s desk. Rowan, Luca, and Santiago had been talking for a while about their holiday plans, but Cameron hadn’t paid attention for so much as a moment. He was staring off at his phone, waiting for any update text from Greyson.

It had been hours since their last text. Maybe he shouldn’t be too concerned, because it was approximately… 2:00 AM in England… but it wouldn’t be the first time Greyson was up at an unreasonable hour talking to Cameron. It wouldn’t be the first time Greyson was too wrapped up in thoughts to fall asleep. It would, though, be the first time in about a week since Greyson went to bed without at least texting Cameron he was going to bed.

Cameron glances at a photo sat on Greyson’s desk, frowning. It’s an image of a little boy and his father, both with matching smiles. A man with glasses, curly brown hair, and an award winning smile, held his son, no older than 8, around the shoulders with such pride. The little boy seemed so happy. So care free. So… not-Greyson-like.

“You good, man?” Rowan asks, pulling Cameron’s attention back.

He looks between the other people in the room before he realizes Rowan was talking to him. “You haven’t said anything in, like, forty minutes.” Luca lifted himself onto his elbows, making eye contact with Cameron. Eye contact that proclaimed the truth, like he knew something Cameron didn’t.

“Yeah,” Cameron exhales. “Just… really tired.”

“You don’t have to stay if you don’t wanna. I know you got a long ass drive home soon…” Rowan frowns. “I dunno how you do it. I could never drive more than, like, three hours.”

“I don’t know either,” Cameron amuses, standing. He can’t keep thinking about Greyson. He might explode if he lets one more thought pass him by, if he occupies Greyson’s space without the key component of Greyson, for one more minute. “I’m gonna go sleep. Let’s get breakfast in the morning before I leave. 9:00 am?”

“I’m down,” Rowan nods. “You guys?”

“Can’t. Gotta pack,” Luca frowns. “Sorry.”

“Me neither. I have to go get an oil change tomorrow morning. See you in January?” Santiago looks up at Cameron.

“See you in January,” Cameron nods. “Night guys.”

“Night!”

Cameron walks home. Fresh air, all that. He texts Greyson eventually, just wishing him a good night’s sleep. Greyson doesn’t respond. Cameron strolls all the way back to the frats, wondering how he will cope with such a long drive without his favorite passenger princess pestering him the entire time, without the stupid games of pool where Cameron has no chance of winning, without the mindless intimacy in random motel rooms, or kissing him at redlights, or holding his hand in line for McDonalds french fries.

He walks in the front door to the fraternity, and he makes immediate eye contact with Sam, who’s attention shot up the instant the door opened. Sam was shaking his head vigorously, as if a warning to turn back, to run.

Everything of Cameron’s was here, though. His bags for tomorrow. His

keys. Everything.

“Hey Cameron!”

Cameron shuts the door behind him, gritting his teeth as he sees Aiden and Bryce both stalking toward him. Aiden claps Cameron on the shoulder with a fake friendly jostle. Cameron pulls away from it, sliding between the two to get into his kitchen. *His* kitchen. Because Aiden was expelled, and Bryce was removed from all his activities, from fraternity to sports.

“What’s that about, buddy? We have an issue?”

“We won’t if everyone agrees to keep their hands to themselves,” Cameron mutters, grabbing a beer out of the fridge and a piece of cold pizza. He kicks the fridge door shut and whirls around to go up the stairs, finding the two standing in front of him, big and burly.

“Last I recall, I wasn’t the one who had an issue with that,” Aiden recalls.

“Then it sounds like we won’t have an issue,” Cameron determines. “I’m going to bed.”

“Dude, I think you have a couple fucking apologies to make,” Aiden sidesteps to block him.

“For what?” Cameron scoffs. “For not letting you gang up on me? Because you got caught? I don’t think so. Sounds like a you problem-” He goes to walk past them. Bryce reaches out and catches his arm.

So much for hands to yourself.

Cameron yanks his arm free, taking two steps away, glaring at the two.

“What are you doing with that crowd?” Bryce asks. Cameron raises an eyebrow. “Ro’s crew. Greyson. All them.”

“I’m not,” Cameron says back, his heart hammering. He wonders how many of the flatmates are listening in. He wonders how many of them have been thinking about this. Talking about this. How many of them know?

“Some damning moments at a bar downtown would say otherwise,” Aiden claims.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

“Are you stalking me?” Cameron asks.

“Look,” Aiden takes a step closer. Cameron takes a step back. “I have a proposition. I stop asking, and you make things nicey-nice with the deans. I have an appeal when we come back in January. You’re gonna show, tell them it wasn’t as big of a deal as you made it out to be, and everything will be… just fine.”

“I don’t know what you think you’re blackmailing me with,” Cameron says hesitantly. *I know exactly what you’re doing* . “But… no. Anyone with a brain could see this coming from a mile away. You have nothing.”

He didn’t see this coming in the slightest, and he absolutely should’ve. Blindsided by living in the moment, he was incredibly risky with the one secret he asked Greyson to keep. He’s a fucking hypocrite, and he knows it.

“Okay,” Aiden shrugs. “So be it.”

“You can leave now,” Cameron says, nodding to the door. “Neither of you live here anymore, and if I called the president, I’m pretty sure he would have police on sight to escort you in minutes.”

“Fine,” Aiden says. He’s too cocky. Too happy. “We’re leaving.”

“Bye.”

“Bye, Cameron.”

When his kitchen is empty again, he stands there, looking at the beer and pizza in his hand, grimacing. He puts them both back and storms up the stairs to his room, plopping down into his desk chair. Just a few weeks. That’s all he wanted. A few weeks of quiet peace with his partner, discovering himself, discovering it all, finding where he belongs before he tells anyone else.

He didn’t see it coming, even if it was always right in front of him.

He texts Greyson again, asking to call, asking to speak to him, asking for some peace of mind. He doesn’t get a response. Not a single one. Not tonight, and not the next morning either.

Greyson laid on his bed with his frames in his hands. He lifts them to the light of his bedside lamp, examining the scratches and dents. He doesn't recall how he scuffed them up so badly. Though, it doesn't surprise him. He was always rough on his things.

When he first got this pair, it was because the old pair broke. Wesley punched him in the face so hard it snapped them in two. Mum was so angry that she made Wesley stay with Grandma for the week. Greyson still feels guilty for that– guilty for the way Mum nursed his bloody nose and black eye, and guilty for the way Wesley sobbed on the stairs while Grandma drove over to get him, and guilty for the way he couldn't look in the mirror with his glasses on without seeing his father.

He wonders if Wesley sees it too.

He wonders if Wesley's ever angry because he looks so little like their father, while Greyson is a spitting image of the very man he killed. He wonders if that's why Wesley swung as hard as he did– to destroy the apparition of a ghost, and not to hurt his little brother. He's always been the angry one, the one who couldn't cope with the feelings he experienced. Doctor Rowland was Wesley's therapist first, afterall.

Greyson sets the glasses down and sighs, running a hand over his face. He should probably call him. He should probably set up just a brief session while he's in the area, get some things off his chest so he can go back to America fresh faced and ready to run rampant. But there's a dark side of him that will always hate Doctor Rowland's office and the feelings that come with it.

Greyson can hear Mum's crying from the next room. The walls are thin. Greyson recalls that sound for the weeks, months, years following Dad's death. Mum's sobs into the pillows until she falls asleep. It never gets easier. The guilt never dissipates.

There's a knock on his door, and Greyson sits up. Phoebe is at the doorway, arms folded over her chest. She chews on her cheek, looking at him expectantly.

"C'mere, kid," Greyson exhales, holding an arm out. Phoebe crawls up into his bed, falling against his shoulder in an embrace. "What do you wanna know?"

"Can you tell me about the time you guys went to Scotland again?" she whispered. Greyson smiles sadly and nods, kissing the top of her hair.

“It was… a terribly long train ride, and it rained the entire time. Not just any rain though– full on thunderstorms, I thought it was a bad omen, telling us to go home,” Greyson began, whispering into her temple. The two fall back into Greyson’s childhood bed, his sister listening to the story of their father, and the way he lived, the way they all lived. In ways she will never remember, and Greyson will be forced to.

Way back then, Greyson never saw it coming. No matter the omens. No matter the warnings. He would never see life becoming this. Perhaps it’s a good thing. It likely would have scared him off if he knew.

Chapter End Notes

The return of the glasses

I didn't know if i would get this out today or not but alas, here it is. i currently have covid, so on the plus side, i have a surplus of writing time, and i'm also through the worst of my symptoms (the other day SUCKED though) so... here's a chapter!

Anyways. here u go. Happy... Friday? I think its Friday? idk days anymore. I've been home for too long.

Until next time o7
hayl (hayloftown on twitter !!!)

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Under the weather

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cameron spent all night wondering what the hell that even meant—what Aiden and Bryce could possibly do to him, hold over him, threaten him with. He tossed and turned all night, nervous, restless, and missing Greyson. And in the morning, as he sat and waited for Rowan, he tried to think all his options through.

Aiden and Bryce could out him. It's an unsettling fact, but he supposes he knew it was always a possibility. It's not that he planned on hiding forever, but he also knew the frats, knew the football team, wasn't the safest place for people like him. For "his lifestyle".

But if Cameron knew anything, it wouldn't just be that. He knew how they worked. He knew they were on Liam's side after Cameron got drugged. He knew they would cross a whole lot of lines just to get revenge. So that *unknown* , that secret possibility of something more… it terrifies him.

"You in there?" Rowan asks, waving a hand in front of Cameron's face. He blinks and nods, taking his fork and stabbing a strawberry. "What's goin' on, bud? You've been weird these past two days."

"Nothing," Cameron insists. "Just… exhausted. It's been a weird semester."

"Tell me about it," Rowan sighs, melting back into his chair. "I mean, football captain? What's next? You gonna be the chair for Delta Phi next year? It's about time they start showing you your worth."

"Yeah," Cameron cracks a tired smile. "Maybe."

"Hell, who knows. The cards are in your favor. You looking to hit anyone up? See anyone cute hanging around? I feel like I remember you hooking up with someone at a party a few weeks back-"

Cameron's heart hammers.

“Huh?”

“Uh… y’know,” Rowan snaps, trying to recall the time. “I know I saw you with ‘em. And Sam said you-“

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Cameron argues.

“Allie!” Rowan claps, sitting up straighter. Cameron frowns. “You can’t tell me I’m wrong. I remember, dude. She’s into you, man. You know it. You gotta see it-“

“Maybe.”

“And you’re into her,” Rowan insists. “Have you been on a date yet? I can set you up. I’m good at-“

“Let’s just get through with the holiday break before you go trying to set me up, okay?”

“Fine,” Rowan sighs. “No fun. Don’t you wanna go on double dates?”

“You and Luca official?” Cameron asks, raising an eyebrow. Rowan clams up, getting pink in the face, shifting in his seat. “Congrats.”

“Thanks,” Rowan smiles to himself. “It’s-it’s weird. I’m nervous. I don’t get nervous about people. He makes me nervous.”

“Cute,” Cameron rolls his eyes. He knows the feeling. The bundle of butterflies swirling in his stomach as he looks at his partner from across the room, like they were fated to be apart, and he yearns for nothing more than his touch. The slight fear of being seen together, and yet, the desire to be known as one and the same.

Cameron listens to his best friend gush about this newfound romance, and he basks in the light that is Rowan’s infectious happiness. He was unabashed, unafraid, to experience these feelings, to be seen in them. He wears his heart on his sleeve and walks a runway with the world as onlookers, and he doesn’t waver in a single step.

They part ways after breakfast with a hug and a promise to call over break. Cameron gets into his car and begins what will feel like the longest drive of his life.

He sits in his driver's seat and anxiously listens to the turn of the tires against the road for the first two hours. When he finally turns on music, though, he still just keeps thinking of Greyson. All these stupid

love songs– they all just sound like him. He is the breaths of freedom in the wind, and he's the snow that flutter onto the windshield in unique speckles that distract Cameron from the goal. He is the beautiful lyrics of romantic warmth and he's the dance of a drumbeat and he's the stupid sun in the sky, hiding behind the clouds.

Hour three, Cameron asks– no, demands – that Siri called his partner.

"Cam," Greyson's voice crackles through the speakers, silencing those love songs that burrow in Cameron's brain like earworms. He can hear the smirk in Greyson's tone. Cameron smiles.

"Hi," Cameron rests his elbow on the window, scratching his eyebrow. "Uh… I… I just…" There's a tension hanging in the space between them as Greyson waits for Cameron's proclamation. "I miss you."

"You miss me?" Greyson smiles, turning over onto his stomach where he laid on his bed, chewing on his cheek and ready to suffocate himself in a pillow so he didn't squeal in excitement. "It's been, what, two days?"

"And?" Cameron breathes. "I miss you."

"Clingy bastard," Greyson murmurs. Cameron swallows the lump in his throat, eyeing the sign that directs him to an exit into the middle-of-nowhere-Connecticut. "I miss you too."

"Do you?" Cameron sounds more hopeful than he should've. More nervous. Greyson furrows his eyebrows, and his cocky smile wavers.

"Of course I do," Greyson insists. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, nothing," Cameron shakes his head in defiance, despite no one looking at him. "So Luca and Rowan-"

"You sound weird. What happened?" Greyson presses. Cameron considers if he should say anything– ruin Greyson's chance to escape? Absolutely not. He won't be that guy. "Cameron."

"How's England? How's your Mom?" Cameron asks back.

Greyson frowns, rolling to his back again and staring up at the ceiling. Mum has been ignoring him since yesterday. She made breakfast this morning and left the table when he came down the stairs. She left for "errands" when Greyson offered taking everyone out to ice cream. He still took Phoebe out. When he came home, Mum was pouting and

reading on the back steps with a cup of tea, avoiding him.

So, here he lay.

“She’s mad at me,” Greyson says. “Because I said I would stay in America for a while after graduation.”

“Don’t you graduate next year? Why is she rushing it?” Cameron asks with a small chuckle.

“I… I don’t know. I think she’s going crazy, being here all on her own,” Greyson tsks. “Like, she has Phoebe, and… and Wes is nearby. But I think she’s having a bit of empty nest syndrome right now. And I feel bad. I should… I should care more about it. About her. She’s worked really hard to get me where I am, so I guess I should consider… consider sticking around?”

“Absolutely not,” Cameron scoffs.

“You don’t get it-”

“I get it plenty,” Cameron insists. Greyson pinches the bridge of his nose. “Clingy parents who obsess over your every move? I know. I know it way too well. I’m telling you… the only way she will recover from this, and the only way you make it out of there with your sanity, is leaving.”

Greyson hates truth.

He hates a lot of things— a dead dad does that to a kid. You become a nihilist. A pessimist. A sourpuss, as Mum would say. He always hated when kids would run around on the playground, laughing. He hated contact sports, and the stupid smiling faces on social media after a particularly good game. He hated holidays, and those stupid families that can all be in the same house and not fight. And he hates truth, in all its poisonous, hurtful ways.

“It will destroy her,” Greyson admits quietly.

“She’ll recover,” Cameron says back. “It can’t make you feel good being back there, can it?”

“Not at all,” Greyson confesses. “It’s… nauseating. You think I’m bad on my own? You can never meet my Mum…”

Shower before hug. Changing clothes when you enter the house. Hand

sanitizer always in reach. They are always dirty. They are all germs.

“I miss you a lot,” Greyson says, this time, with purpose. “I wish I was going to your Christmas instead.”

“Maybe next year,” Cameron jokes, making Greyson smile. “I would’ve loved to have company for the drive.”

“Where are you now?”

“About to cross into New York,” Cameron responds, tracing his lips with his fingers. “It loses all its fun without you though.”

“Idiot,” Greyson rolls his eyes. “You’re traveling the length of the country and you’re bored. Every twenty minutes, there's something cool to do. Stop being a bitch and do something.”

“Alone?” Cameron questions. “Who gives a shit about the bars and the people and the beaches when I’m just standing out there on my own. I’m gonna take a straight shot down, and just get it over with.”

“Because that’s safe.”

“Shut up. It’s either that or go crazy in silence.”

The radio isn’t loud enough. The absence of a person in his passenger seat is haunting. The looming threat of returning home without the defense, without the shield that was Greyson, was scaring him more than he’d like to admit. He loves home as an adult, and fears it just the same as when he was a child.

Greyson pinches the bridge of his nose. He can hear footsteps trailing up the stairs, meaning either Phoebe was home and going to play in her room, or-

Two short knocks on his door followed by it opening. Greyson looks at his brother, who seems equally as excited to see him (as if Wesley didn’t just walk into Greyson’s room).

“What?” Greyson asks less than pleasantly. Cameron tenses his posture, pinching his mouth shut.

“Mum says we’re going to church for the dinner mass.”

“Okay, have fun?” Greyson says back, furrowing his eyebrows. Wesley glares at him. “Wes, I’m on the phone-“

“Well, hang up, dipshit. Mum wants to talk to Dad and stop thinking about you leaving her,” Wesley snips. “Do her the favor of swallowing your pride and think about someone else for once.”

“Get out, Wesley,” Greyson demands.

“Get dressed! It’s time to leave.” Wesley shot back.

“Why do I have to-“

“Jesus Christ— Mum!” Wesley turns to the hallway, and Greyson instantly scrambles off his bed.

“Fucking Wes— Jesus. Fine! I’m going!” Greyson shouts. “Cameron, I gotta go. I’ll call you when I get home.”

“You gonna be okay?” Cameron asks gently. Wesley hasn’t left his doorway. Greyson scowls.

“Drive safe. I’ll talk to you in a bit.”

“No, you won’t. Let’s go-“

“Let me get dressed without your supervision, you prick!” Greyson groans, kicking the door shut to shove Wesley out of his face. “Christ. Okay. Bye.”

“Greyson-“

The line clicks dead, and Cameron returns to his drive in silence, now more concerned than ever before.

They weren’t much of church-goers as kids.

Mum was religious, and before Dad started on chemo, they would make their Sunday appearance at some point— though, with three kids and a disabled father, it oftentimes was not the morning mass. And when Dad’s immune system went to shit, the community made it possible for them to watch it online. The TV in the livingroom played the sermons all of Sunday while the family carried about their business, doing homework, fighting, playing, whatever it was that the Hamptons did.

Today, what the Hampton’s do is appease Mum.

Wesley drove. Mum in the passenger seat. Greyson hated that feeling

— like he was a little kid, crunched into the backseat. He rested his head on the window and watched the rain fall, wishing he was still talking to Cameron.

He was never the biggest church fan. Unlike most people in his circle, he had nothing overtly traumatizing nor horrific in church. He was never subjected to any form of abuse or mistreatment in the name of God. He just… didn't care for religion. He thought confession was stupid, so he didn't go. He thought the priests were full of shit, so he sat back and pretends to listen. And most importantly: he refused to believe in a God as cruel as this one. If this "all-loving Father" was their God, Greyson hated him. Hated him with a capital H.

They arrive at the church, and Phoebe held Greyson's hand as they walk in. Mum wants a pew toward the front. Greyson most certainly didn't, but he does as she wants. Mostly because Wesley delivered a hard shove to his back, making him stumble after her, rather than to a pew in the back.

Greyson sat wedged between his siblings, where he always belongs. Between the perfection that is his older brother and the sweetness that is his little sister. Greyson is neither.

Greyson glances at his phone in hope to see a text, an update, anything to prove that Cameron was making his boring journey into something fun. His home screen is blank. He even opens the message thread, finding nothing. He frowns, shooting Cameron a text.

***Greyson** : sorry again to dip out. I'll call you the second I can.*

"Put it away," Mum mutters to him. "Not at church."

Greyson looks at his mother with a scowl. It takes extreme amounts of self restraint to not argue with her. Begrudgingly, he pockets the device and sits back, tuning out the entirety of the sermon. He fiddles with the cuffs of his sleeves, and he bounces his knees, and he damn near falls asleep at one point. That is, of course, until the organ pipes up in the back of the room, and Greyson flinched.

It's nothing like Cameron's music. Nothing like his melodies, his intricate songs, whether self taught or self written. It's aggressive, critical, and angry. It reminds Greyson of the deep rooted feelings and problems within himself that makes him hate church. It is the aggression and the anger and the depression that comes with this stupid town, and it's the ache that comes with the scuffed walls in the hallways in his childhood home, and it's the noise in his head that

makes every public space feel unsafe.

He's surrounded by unfamiliarities. His brother, and the church, and the pew, and the pastor. A lady is sitting behind him and taps him on the shoulder, breathing down his neck as she asks for a pamphlet in the pocket in front of him. There's a family with a group of children in front of him, and he just thinks about the way the youngest keeps sneezing, rocketing spit and snot around like biological warfare. Mum and Wesley get up to take communion, and Greyson almost throws up.

His hands are shaking. His heart is racing. He wants to cry, and he can't quite identify why. He doesn't know what's wrong with him, and he doesn't understand why he's feeling all these stupid things right this moment, but he just knows he can't sit here for another minute if he wants to stay sane. He looks at Phoebe, mindlessly thumbing at pages in the Bible, then to Mum, who was about to walk back to the pew.

"If she asks, I'm in the bathroom," Greyson murmurs to his sister, standing and sliding out of the pews. He hears his mother speak his name, gently, but he pretends not to. He just walks down the aisle with a steady pace, and the second the doors are in reach, he picks up his speed. He slides out the double doors and into the frigid British rain, pacing down the sidewalk and toward the car. His breath billows from his lips like smoke. His knees are shaking. He's panicking.

Why is he panicking?

"Greyson!"

He winces, fingers interlocked behind his neck, eyes shut. He stands there in the dark sidewalk, rocking on his heels, letting the rain soak him through.

"Greyson, what the hell-" Wesley caught up, going to grab his arm, and stopping short. "Are you crying?"

"Go back inside, Wes," Greyson pleads. "Leave me alone."

It starts to rain harder. Greyson can't see. Another reason he hates these stupid fucking glasses. Rain, or tears, or any little smudge blinds him more than if he just didn't wear them. He pushes them off his face and reaches to rub his eyes, stopping short. *Wash your hands. Don't touch your face. You've touched doorknobs and public books* . He can't breathe. His eyes burn. His entire face feels hot.

“Can we please go inside?” Wesley requests. “Get out of the rain, at least?” He touches Greyson’s shoulder in an effort to guide him back up the path to the church entrance. Greyson flinches away. “Greyson-”

“Don’t touch me,” Greyson says, less of a demand, more of a beg. “You-Your hands are dirty, and-and you have been out without-without-”

“Greyson,” Wesley steps closer. Greyson steps back. “Greyson I’m not sick-”

“You don’t *know* that,” Greyson’s jaw trembles, looking up at Wesley. Even eye contact felt too close. “What if- I don’t know-What if-if communion was infected with-with-”

“You’re acting crazy, Greyson.”

Wesley keeps saying his name. It’s driving him mad. He says the name like it means something. He says it like it’s supposed to drag him out of a trance. Instead, it’s only getting more frustrating. Years of arguing. Years of resentment. And now Wesley treats him like the little brother Greyson has always been: the one who needed protecting and comfort.

“I killed him,” Greyson whispers. Wesley’s face fell. “I-I killed Dad. I killed him. And-And Mum lives in this silent house without him, and it’s my fault, and I can’t-I can’t replace him. I can’t be him. I don’t want to be him.”

“You need to take a breath.”

“Dad’s dead and it’s *my fault* ,” Greyson says, his voice cracking. “I miss him so much, Wes…”

Wesley has always wondered whether or not Greyson felt guilt, felt remorse. It never seemed like he truly understood the weight of his actions. Wesley wasn’t even 20 years old when Dad died, but he knew better. Greyson should have known better, too. Greyson *did* know better. He had to. And because of Greyson, three kids, 19, 15, and 2, were left fatherless.

He has his answer now.

Maybe Wesley was a teenager, barely an adult himself. But Greyson… Greyson was a child.

He was just a kid. Still is.

“I do too, buddy,” Wesley murmurs, shuffling a little closer. Greyson, this time, didn’t back away. “Holidays are always hard. I know you must miss him more when you come home, though.” Greyson closes his eyes, fat tears rolling down his cheeks. Wesley gets even closer. “Sometimes I still walk in the house and expect to see him.”

“I’m sorry,” Greyson chokes out.

Wesley wraps an arm around his little brother. It’s been a while since Wesley thought of him like that. Little brother. The menace that wet the bed until he was 6. The idiot who had recurring nightmares of dinosaurs and would crawl into Wesley’s bed until he was 11. The pudgy face of a little toddler who would stuff handfuls of macaroni in his mouth and manage to get the plastic-y cheese everywhere. The baby who would sit in the bath with Wesley as long as they possibly could, fighting off their parents by splashing and using squirting bath toys.

The guy who moved halfway across the world to run from his childhood, from his wrongdoings, from Wesley. Who didn’t come home in the summers, because he didn’t want to be around Wesley. Who didn’t stay longer than he had to in the winter because he felt like a burden. Who used to have therapy sessions twice a week to manage his complex emotions. Who couldn’t so much as get the mail without gloves and a face mask, or walk to the local coffee shop without coming home to shower before he ate.

Greyson Gregory Hampton. Dad’s namesake. Wesley never understood why he wasn’t good enough to bear his father’s name, why he wasn’t the one chosen. But he sees Dad in everything Greyson does. He sees Dad in every expression Greyson makes, from smiling to tears. He sees Dad in Greyson’s laugh, and his adventurous attitude. He sees Dad in Greyson’s stubborn anger, and in his fear, and he sees Dad in Greyson’s resilience. Perhaps it was fate. Dad’s namesake would be his downfall. Perhaps it was an act of forgiveness before the crime– a reassurance that Dad didn’t hate him from the heavens.

Greyson buries his face in his brother’s shoulder, and he cries. He apologizes more with every passing breath. It will never be enough. It will never be the same.

“I got you,” Wesley reassures his baby brother. “You’re okay.”

He’s not. None of them are. It won’t be okay, ever.

When Mum comes out with Phoebe, Greyson hurriedly tries to pull himself together. For both of them. For himself.

Looking up at Wesley, it just hurt worse.

For Wesley.

It’s too dark to see Greyson’s bloodshot eyes or pink face. He’s wordless when Mum asks what happened– Wesley just claimed they needed some air. No need to upset her.

They get home, and Greyson goes inside first. He needs a shower. He needs solitude. Wesley sat in the hallway outside the bathroom door. In fear? Out of love? He’s not sure. He just wants to be there. In reach.

Greyson stood under scalding water that turned his skin a bright red and made it hard to breathe. The steam made the walls drip with condensation. He scrubbed, rinsed, scrubbed, and rinsed, five times over. Under his nailbeds, behind and in the cone of his ear, at the hardest spot to reach in his back, and his face– he washed his face until it hurt. His hands got raw, cracked, even a little bloody at the fingertips, after a while. By then, he just cooked in the steam and the hot water, trying to melt the night off of him.

He gets dressed, his skin hurting as he pulled on a clean shirt. His fingers tremble as he looks at his skin in the mirror. He should put on some kind of lotion or moisturizer. He looks at the fancy bottle of lavender shit Mum had on the counter. All he can fathom is the germs living on the mouth of the bottle. The sink too. He lifts his hands away, wondering how the hell he’s supposed to wash his hands when even the sink is dirty. He wants another shower.

Opening the door, he nearly trips over his brother, who sat against the wall, eyes shut, arms crossed over his chest, asleep. Silently, Greyson stepped over his outstretched legs and slipped into his childhood bedroom, clicking the door shut behind him. Solitude. Loneliness. It's the cleanest he will ever get.

Sitting on his bed, he watches the rain splatter against his bedroom window. Sniffles, and tightness in his chest, he feels under the weather, and he has only been home two days. The end of his trip wouldn’t come fast enough.

Chapter End Notes

A little Wesley hatred and redemption all at once. I love them and

their stupid lil rivalry. those bitches need some therapy fr.

anyways. i apparently have this habit rn of posting rbtl and sotd on the same day WHOOPS im sorry for overloading u idiots. i just post whenever the chapter is done and i have been writing both simultaneously these past few weeks.

here u go. happy saturday. until next time, idiots.
-hayl (hayloftown on twitter !)

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Truth hurts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cameron stares at a photo for a painfully long time in a stupid little coffee shop three hours outside Kissimmee.

He should finish the drive already— he almost made it all the way to Florida before he stopped to sleep, staying at a shitty motel on the border of Georgia. He knows Greyson would've hated it. It was gross, and the room smelled of cigarettes and strip clubs. Cameron slept and left as quickly as possible.

Greyson sent him an image from his trip abroad. He'd been quiet since their conversation ended abruptly yesterday morning. Cameron had anxiously awaited any kind of communication but to no avail. His first message was a snapchat. An awkward angle from below the chest, Greyson's hair fluffed in every which direction, his cheeks pink and a pair of foreign glasses sat on the bridge of his nose. Cameron studied it for so long. Had he been crying? Did he just wake up? Since when does he wear glasses? He didn't ask his partner any of these questions in fear of the reaction, but needless to say, he was concerned.

He tried giving Greyson a call. It went to voicemail. Text, too. It didn't matter, though. He was on his own with nothing but his thoughts and the open road.

He was welcomed home with open arms and excited smiles. At least– that's how his sisters welcomed him. His parents weren't home.

"Can you drive me to my friends house?" is the first thing Calyx asks after releasing Cameron from the hug.

"No! Don't do it. She's grounded," Callan insists, smirking.

"Am not! Mom said if I–"

"Yeah but Dad said-"

“Woah, woah… No one is going anywhere,” Cameron scoffs. “I just got out of the car. I’m not driving any of you little shits anywhere. And why are you grounded? What did you do?”

“Nothing!” Calyx insists, huffing and marching off. Cameron furrows his eyebrows, frowning as Callan chased after her, both of the girls shouting at one another and leaving their older brother alone in the foyer.

Cameron grimaces at the sight of his childhood home. It’s like the spirit of Christmas threw up all over the house. Garlands, and tinsel, and sparkles, and all this bullshit on the walls and bannisters. Every inch of the house felt like a department store decorated it as a showroom. Even the couch felt too “done-up” to sit on.

He carries his belongings up the stairs and drops them on his childhood bed. He wouldn’t be staying in a hotel this time, unfortunately– he wanted to save his money, and he wasn’t as concerned about his parents walking in on him with his partner, so it only made sense to just… stay at the house. He plopped down onto the edge of his bed and looked around at his bedroom, back in that trance of thoughts that he was in barely a month ago.

The posters on the walls of football players, the piano in the corner of the room, the neatness to his bed from Mom making it after doing laundry… Cameron thinks about the magazines tucked into his bedside table drawer, and he remembers the years of tossing and turning, and eventually staring out the window and squinting until he saw the stars. Most of all, he remembers the years of him and Clarke, side by side, trying to reside in silence but both scheming their loud futures.

He’s not sure how long he sat there. He just knows, when he looked up, Callan was at the doorway.

“They’ll be home any minute now,” Callan mumbles, kicking her feet against the ground. “How was the end of–”

“What happened to Callie?” Cameron asks, interrupting her. Callan glances up, making eye contact and frowning. She looks over her shoulder before wading deeper into the bedroom, tapping a couple keys of the keyboard mindlessly.

“She’s… been off. I don’t know. Dad’s going crazy though. She can barely breathe without him barking orders. It’s like-” Callan stopped herself before the words could come out, but Cameron knew what she

was going to say.

“It’s like she’s the new me…” Cameron assumes. Callan deflates. “Has she been acting out?” His sister nods. “To you?”

“To everyone,” Callan exhales. “We fight every day over something stupid. Her and Mom are butting heads all the time. Talking to Dad is like walking through a minefield. She’s failing math!” Callan whirls around to look at her brother. “When have we ever known Callie to fail at *anything* , nevermind one of her best subjects?”

“She’s probably just going through a phase…” Cameron said, trying to sound optimistic. “You did it, too. Remember sixth grade, when you-”

“This isn’t that,” Callan groans. “I don’t know what it is, but someone needs to knock some sense into her before she does something reckless and dumb.”

“You want me to talk to her,” Cameron guesses. Callan nods. “Okay. We’ll see. Let’s settle down a bit, maybe take a breather. It might not even be–”

Cameron is interrupted by the door downstairs closing, and Dad’s voice calling after Calyx– something along the lines of *Callie Mae, you better be home if you want a bed to sleep in tonight-* . Callan looks at her older brother pointedly, and Cameron stands, skirting out of his bedroom and inching his way down the stairs. The closer he gets, the louder Dad is– Calyx and Dad had already devolved into a screaming match in the kitchen, consisting of *fuck you’s* and *go to your room* . Mom was hovering at the base of the stairs, hiding from the kitchen. Hiding from her daughter.

Cameron sets a hand on her shoulder, making her jump. She looked up and broke out into a sad smile.

“Hi baby,” she whispers, standing on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Welcome home.”

“That bad?” Cameron murmurs. She nods, biting her thumb at the sound of a slam. Cameron sighs, leaving her in the foyer and moving into the kitchen to interrupt whatever explosive conversation was occurring. Upon his presence, the room falls silent, and Dad’s scowl is replaced by a grand smile, throwing his arms out.

Calyx deflates and takes this as her excuse to slip out.

Back at it … Cameron thinks.

At dinner, Clarke comes over to welcome Cameron back to Kissimmee for the few weeks he will be in the area, but it's quieter than usual. Or, he supposes, not than usual. It's about as quiet as it used to be when Cameron was in high school, picking fights and getting grounded for coughing too loud.

Callie poked and prodded at her meal without interest. Callan kept eyeing her little sister, then Cameron, raising her eyebrows. Cameron didn't play into it. He didn't want to make the drama any worse. Clarke spoke quietly about her day and the week ahead– her plans around the holidays, and if she would come over for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and work holiday parties. Mom entertained the conversation by asking about outfits, but even Dad looked too agitated to let it slide. He kept setting his knife down a little too hard, and his eyebrows were furrowed like they were glued together, and everything was just… tense.

"So, where's loverboy?" Clarke asks, trying to get someone else involved in breaking the silence. Cameron glances up, face getting pink. For once, Dad looked interested, looking at his son.

"Oh, uh… England. He went home for Christmas," Cameron says back, biting his cheek. He stabs a piece of penne pasta and averts his eyes again.

"Did you break up?" Calyx asked suddenly. Cameron frowns.

"What? No-"

" *Calyx* -" Dad hissed.

"I was just asking!" Calyx argues back.

"Show your brother a little bit of basic respect for Christ's sake-"

"Oh, sorry I don't bow and kiss the ground he walks on with every step. He's my brother, I'm allowed to ask if-"

"Why are we arguing?" Mom asks desperately. "Can't we just-"

"Well stop setting up your brother to fail. I'm sure he's anxious enough as is with his terrible luck at relationships and college and he has plenty of struggles on his own without-"

“I’m not struggling,” Cameron interrupts. Dad bit back a comment. Calyx shrinks. Cameron looks between his father and his mother, uncertain on what was happening, and where that came from. “I’m… I’m fine, guys. I’m happy, even. I’m in a stable relationship, going to school, I made dean’s list for the semester-”

“That’s not what he meant, honey. We just worry about you…” Mom reassures, taking his hand. Cameron pulled away. “Sweetheart-”

“You think I’m going to fail,” Cameron realizes.

He is met with nothing. No eye contact. Even Mom shrinks herself slightly, scratching the back of her neck. Callan puts her head in her hands, already knowing what this would turn into.

“You know… it wouldn’t have taken much to help me as a kid. Maybe a few encouraging words, a little kindness, and maybe a psychologist, and I would’ve been just fine. But you are dead set on seeing me fall apart, and so eager to play in the rubble. You’ve done it to me, and you’re doing it to Callie now too,” Cameron scoffs. “Maybe it’s a new relationship, but we’re fine. I’m not struggling. Not with Greyson, or class, or sports, or anything else. It’s kinda funny how that worked– I moved away from you guys and suddenly I am the most stable I’ve ever been.”

“Cameron, please just-” Dad began, but he was already taking his plate and walking away. “Would you just sit your ass down for a nice family dinner since we-”

“It stopped being a nice family dinner when you turned into a tyrannical asshat. *Again* ,” Cameron called over his shoulder before marching his way up to his room.

The house has been tense since Greyson and Mum’s conversation the other day.

Christmas was only three days away. Greyson thought it was silly to spend all their time arguing and uncomfortable with one another when the whole point of the holidays was getting together with loved ones and experiencing the joyous spirit of Christmas, or whatever bullshit Christians want to spew. Mum especially loves Christmas, loves gift-giving, and the church, and all that stupid shit.

In the mornings, Greyson makes breakfast for Phoebe and spends time with his sister. Sometimes, that’s building old dusty puzzles, or

playing a game of scrabble, and other times, it consisted of his sister venting about every problem in life while laying on the floor while Greyson quietly supports her from wherever he sat. It was a good bonding experience. It really showed just how much his baby sister had grown.

In the afternoons, when Mum was done working, she would come home and start her obsessive cleaning. Shower, and scrubbing every surface anxiously until her joints hurt, and she begged Greyson and Phoebe to help with something. It drove him mad.

In the evenings, dinner was silent. Mum would try for maybe a few minutes to make small talk, but it never got anywhere. When Wesley was over, it was even quieter. Greyson would go to bed feeling deflated, and more tired than he would if he ran a marathon. That's what all this bullshit felt like: an emotional marathon.

He sat in his bed one evening before dinner, staring at an email at the top of his screen. The subject *appointment availability* . The first line read: *Hello Greyson! Nice to hear from you agai-*

He felt breathless. Pained. Chewing on his fingers until the edges around his nailbeds were raw, he clicks on the email and erases the notification that sat atop his screen. It felt disgusting to read these words again.

Hello Greyson! Nice to hear from you again!

I'm elated to have heard from you. Even years since the events that may have brought you to my practice, you may sometimes still need a listening ear. That's what I'm here for.

You're in luck– despite my busy books during the holidays, I do have a 45-minute opening tomorrow morning at 9:15 from a last-minute cancellation. I'll scribble your name in. It will be good to see you again.

Until tomorrow, Greyson.

Isaac Rowland, PhD, LMHC

He closes his eyes and runs a hand over his face, sighing. He's fourteen all over again.

"Greyson! Dinner!" Mum called from downstairs.

Greyson frowns, thinking about what he should reply back with. A *see*

you tomorrow! perhaps? *Thanks* .? He doesn't know. He just knows he already regrets the decision, both to make the appointment and to come home.

He ends up not sending a response. He glances at his phone, at the two missed calls since this morning from Cameron, at the notification of over 200 texts he hadn't opened from various group chats and friends. He simply didn't have the energy for it. For any of it. For the grief, or the misery, or the guilt. He's just tired.

"Greyson!"

He opens up his texts with Cameron– the most recent message was him mentioning that he hates being home without a buffer. Greyson smiles sadly, texting him back finally. *Me too.*

His bedroom door opens, and Wesley stands on the other side, eyebrows raised expectantly. Greyson makes a pitiful eye contact that makes Wesley frown.

"You good?"

"Yeah," Greyson sighs, standing and following Wesley out to the kitchen, where Mum and Phoebe sat waiting for them. He joins the table with a mutter of an apology, sitting down and serving himself a plate like the rest of the family. The table is filled with nothing but silence and chewing sounds (Greyson's nightmare). The only other interruption into the noiseless hell is the vibration of Greyson's phone with a text.

Pulling it out, he slyly slid it onto his thigh to check the message. Cameron.

***Cameron** : Yeah? What's going on for you?*

Greyson peers up at his family. No one was paying him any attention. Quickly and quietly, he sends back some bullshit reponse– *just overwhelmed by it all. Ready to be home again. Miss you a lot. Everything alright with you guys?*

It doesn't describe so much as half of his thoughts, but he didn't want to worry his partner with the nitty-gritty details that don't make sense. Cameron wouldn't understand, nor probably care, about his sibling drama, or his daddy issues, and he definitely wouldn't understand this mental battle with whether or not he shows up at a therapy appointment in the morning tomorrow.

He watches the bubble bounce as Cameron formulates a text back. Greyson took a bite of chicken and eyed his brother, who was already looking at him. Both boys instantly avert their eyes downward again. Greyson's phone vibrates again with the message Cameron sent.

***Cameron** : idk. Old shit kicking up, and stuff is going on with Callie and-*

"Put your phone away, Greyson," Mum mumbled between bites. Greyson ignores her and tries to finish reading the text. "Now, please."

"One second," Greyson says back.

"It's dinner. You spend it with your family. Put the phone away, you know the rule-"

"Okay, well, no one's been speaking for the past several days, so I assumed dinner became more about eating then spending time together," Greyson says back, rolling his eyes and stuffing his phone in his pocket.

"Excuse me?"

"It's driving me insane, Mum," Greyson insists. She recoils. "You. This. All of it. You're making me crazy with all this. I get that I've been away, but-"

"It's like you're an entirely different person, you know that?!" Mum says, her words like venom. "It's-It's like you up and went to that fancy school, and suddenly I don't know you anymore. You're not my Grey anymore. You're not that same little boy who-who was scared of his shadow, and was so shy and sweet-"

"Because I'm not terrified anymore, Mum!" Greyson exclaims, setting his utensils down and sitting back. "I-I'm not so scared that someone standing next to me will give me the bubonic plague! I can leave my bedroom and not be scared about touching doorknobs and having enough hand sanitizer. I-I've traveled, Mum. I live in a different country! And-and I've driven the entire length of the country this year! And I've stayed in motels, and gone to bars, and hell, I-I've experienced life! Real life! And all that backtracks the second I get back. Any progress I made is gone the moment I'm home. "

"What do you mean you drove the country -" Mum scowls. "Do you know how reckless that is? You-You never told me you were-"

"On Thanksgiving," Greyson states. "You called, and I told you I was

spending the holiday elsewhere. We drove to Florida together. Do you have any idea how crazy it was? How *fun* ? It was gorgeous, Mum. I've never seen so many beaches! Hell– I used a gas station bathroom. It was disgusting, but I've done it!"

"Who on Earth would you travel the country with on a whim like that? You barely have friends over there. You said it yourself, you don't like the half of-"

"I have a boyfriend, Mum," Greyson confessed.

The table goes quiet again.

Her face goes slack. Wesley is taken aback, too. Phoebe folds her arms over her chest and tries to shrink herself smaller.

"You…" Mum blinks a few times. "You're gay?" Greyson bit his cheek. "Since when?"

"I never hid it from you," Greyson mumbles. "You just… never noticed."

"How-How could you not tell me this? Who is he? Is he good to you? Do you– Does he know about-"

"Mum, take it easy," Wesley murmurs.

"Is he clean?"

"Mum!" Wesley exclaims. Greyson scoffs, standing.

"What? I think it's a completely reasonable-"

"It's not the 80's, Mum!" Greyson shouts, throwing his arms out. He's laughing incredulously. "There are so many things you could say right now– *congratulations* , or-or *what's his name* or even something like *are you happy –*"

"Well, are you happy?!"

"Yes!" Greyson can't believe this. His own mother. How could she of all people be the one to talk like this? "Yes, Mum. I am-I was the happiest I had ever been in those days where it was me, and him, and strange motels, and dingy bars, and not answering any of your phone calls. I have never been happier than when I was in America, away from-from this obsessive-compulsive bullshit that has ruined me as a human being. I will never be that happy here, Mum. I have never been

that happy here."

"Truth hurts," Dad used to say. And he was right. The truth is the most painful set of words any person could ever stumble upon. The truth of life, and death, and routine and family and all that bullshit that makes a person who they are– that truth all hurts. It cuts deep, until you are bleeding out every ounce of life you have left.

Mum looks as though she had just been stabbed and gutted. Horrified, hurt, and stuck in a grief she never thought she would feel so intensely again. Loss. That's what this was.

"I met his family, Mum," Greyson continues, every word another slice into her. "His mother is the sweetest woman in the world, who-who brought me into the house with open arms and no hesitation. His sisters? He has three sisters. They all– they all go out, and do things, and hug people, and kiss cheeks, and they-they wanna buy me Christmas presents, and his Dad likes to talk sports with me. When was the last time any of you gave a shit about what I was doing?"

"Doctor Rowland said-"

"Fuck what he said to you! It doesn't matter what *my* therapist told *you* !" Greyson says. "It-It didn't make a difference then, and it doesn't make a difference now. I have been a shell of a person who was boiled and bleached out of their own body since the day Dad got sick and I'm *tired of it* . I'm tired of being the perfect kid who needs to do everything right or else people die. I'm tired of-of this. Of all of this. The *guilt* has killed me a dozen times over. The-the shoes, and the showers, and the hand sanitizer, and the smell of bleach, and-and Christ, Mum, I don't give a shit about my stupid fucking glasses."

Truth hurts , Doctor Rowland would repeat in the years after Dad's death. It hurts those you loves, and it hurts yourself. It is one of the most painful forms of self-inflicted pain because it doesn't go away. It simmers, forever. Truth might grow, but it is always truth.

"I'm done, Mum," Greyson says. "I'm… I'm done with the church. I'm done with appeasing your mental health at the cost of my own. And I don't want to hear a damn word of your thoughts on my boyfriend unless it is a well-thought-out statement of your support. Dad was our voice of reason, and he died, and suddenly you have become nothing but mayhem and chaos and I can't do it anymore. I'm done."

And with that, he walks back to his bedroom, away from the explosion of painful honesty that splattered across the kitchen walls.

Every passing day without correspondence from his partner makes Cameron more on edge.

It's almost Christmas, for fucks sake. He's barely been dating this man for a month, and he's ruined. He's completely, entirely ruined by him. Too long without texts? A full day without a phone call? Cameron was a bucket of anxiety, an echo-chamber of failures that his family places upon him. He will never be good enough. He will never be good.

He stands and walks across the hall, opening the door to his little sisters' room. Calyx was sitting on her bed with headphones on, drawing mindlessly in a book in her lap.She glanced up, then immediately back to her drawing. Cameron shuffles in, arms folded over his chest and glancing over her shoulder. She was drawing a skull with weeds and flowers growing from every orifice. She tenses as Cameron studies the art closely, slowly sitting on the chair beside the bed.

"You need something?" she asks in a mumble. Cameron chewed on his cheek, unsure of what he wanted to say, what he *should* say, at this moment. "What?"

"What gives?" he asks finally. She shrugs, but slides one of the headphones off an ear. Her pencil keeps working. "You're turning into me."

"Good. Maybe it means Dad will like me eventually," she mutters.

" *Not* good," Cameron shot back. "Bad. Very bad. Because high school was hell, Callie. I spent the rest of my years as a kid miserable. I don't want that for you."

"I don't know what to tell you, Cameron. I didn't do anything that-"

"Boyfriend or mental health?" Cameron interrupts. Callie deflates. "Which one is it?"

"Both…" she shrinks in her spot, hiding her face behind her sketchbook. "He's so cute."

"But?" Cameron raises an eyebrow. She shrugs. "If he is a bad influence, then he's not worth it. A pretty face only gets you so far."

"But I like him," Callie whines. "He-He's funny. He's cool. He's one of those guys that everyone just *likes* . I can't be a target if he's on my

side…" Cameron knows the feeling all too well. It hits closer to home than ever. He nods to himself, leaning his head against the window. His heart softens for his little sister. "I don't know. It's all so much. He's the one thing that doesn't always feel terrible."

"But does he make you feel good?"

He always wanted his sisters to live the happiest lives they could, filled with love, adventure, and pride. He wanted them to have everything he didn't as a kid, and he wanted to save them from the pain of it all– the pain of Dad's wrath, and Mom's compliance, and the sisters' silence. He was too late. They were already here.

"You will find a million people who will love you in beautiful ways," Cameron tells his little sister. "Boys who will be more handsome, and more charming, and who don't make you feel like you're breaking the rules by breathing. And you will also feel at peace. Sometimes, those things take time. But you'll get there. You get to direct that."

"I lost the reins. I have no control over any of it," she sniffles.

"That's not true," he shook his head. "You always have power. Whether Dad wants to hear it or not, you are powerful."

He always wished Clarke would talk to him like this as a kid. He supposes, she never could. She was too busy hiding in her own cupboard from her own demons. Clarke didn't experience life the way Cameron and Calyx have thus far. Clarke and Callan will never understand the way their parents will affect them with a single judging glare. They will never understand the change in pitch and how it terrifies them. And they will never understand the internal battle that accompanies every outward argument.

"I'm so tired," Callie whispers, putting her head in her hands, letting the tears slip. "I hate all of it."

"I know, kid…" Cameron sits forward, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "I know."

If anyone gets it, it's him…

The waiting room smells of stale saltines, old books, and a rustic-scented candle. Surprisingly, the dusty odor didn't bother Greyson. Not one bit. There was a comfort in the familiarity, and a solace in the imperfection.

He showed up for the appointment thirty minutes early– he didn't want to be in the house anymore, and he talked himself into thinking he would have enough paperwork to complete to fill the time. In reality, it was a total of two forms, both asking for the same information just in different formats– name, date of birth, insurance, basic histories, etc. Blah blah blah, boring shit about his boring life. He was done with the paperwork in five minutes and spent the next twenty five twiddling his thumbs and trying not to drive himself mad with the sound of sniffles from the receptionist, the buzzing against his leg from his phone, and the memories of last night's fight.

Time inched by at a snail-like pace. Every second felt like an eternity. His knees bounce anxiously. It's an empty waiting room— anyone else who was waiting with him had already been called back.

Greyson remembers years of this office, once a week. Then once every other week. Once a month. Once a season. On special occasions. The receptionist used to talk to him about tennis and ask about school. She felt like one of his only friends. She's since been replaced by a girl who looks like she can't be that much older than Greyson himself. In fact, she looked familiar— they probably went to high school together. He keeps his head down and avoids eye contact.

"Greyson?"

A woman who was certainly not Dr. Rowland stood at the doorway to the back offices, making eye contact with the only occupant of the waiting room. Greyson stands, stuffing his hands in his pockets and following her.

"Isaac will be in shortly. Take a seat," she opens the door to his office. It looks exactly the same as he left it, only adding some art to his corkboard. Greyson nods at the woman and enters the empty room, sinking into an armchair and folding himself up in a small yet comfortable position, legs pulled onto the chair with him, picking at his nail beds.

He couldn't help but look around at everything that's stayed perfectly consistent. His pen cup with all the same style calligraphy tools. The art supplies on the desk near the window for the patience who do art during their sessions. Books galore. Greyson even sees a drawing of his own still framed on the bookshelf— something stupid he did that first week after Dad died and he was too stressed to talk about it yet.

He's not sure how long he's sitting in silence. There's no clock in this

room, and he was too anxious to take out his phone and let himself stress over the notifications he's missed. He just knows he's going crazy while waiting.

"Greyson!" There's the familiar voice. "Sorry to keep you waiting…"

"S'alright." Greyson watches as his doctor walks around the chairs and to his spot— a chair similar to Greyson's beside his desk. He grabs his coffee and takes a sip.

"How you been, kid? Or-I guess… you're not much of a kid anymore," Dr. Rowland says with a shining smile. He thinks there's a small part of his teenage self that had a crush on him when he first started coming.

In all honesty, Dr. Rowland wasn't a bad guy. Greyson's hatred of this office, of therapy, of all this bullshit, was none of Dr. Rowland's fault. The man has always worked his ass off to give Greyson the best form of help he could. It's all on Greyson and his need for misery that hates this.

So why was he here?

"You're quiet this morning," he notes. Greyson nods, running a hand over his face. "Tired? Or are you thinking?"

"Both…?" Greyson flickers his eyes up, making the briefest of eye contact before looking back down.

"Well…" Dr. Rowland leans over toward his desk and grabs a binder with Greyson's last name and patient number on it. "Let's see where we left off. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"A year," Greyson confirms. He flips through the binder to the very end, skimming his notes.

"So, you're attending Brown University, you live in the dorms with your friend Rowan. You have a friend down the hall. You are fairly comfortable with all of them, and even began to open up with your roommate as time went on. You also expressed interest in trying to branch out?"

"I did," Greyson nods again, smiling sadly. "I've… I think I've done it. Branch out, I mean."

"Really?" He sits forward. "Meet anyone new?"

And so, Greyson tells him.

He talks earnestly about his beloved roommate and best friends, and he introduces Dr.Rowland (who insists Greyson calls him Isaac once more— for once, he agrees) to Luca and Cameron via photos on his phone. It takes a few exchanges of conversation before Greyson confesses his relationship with Cameron (and the secrecy of it all). He talks about traveling to Florida, and feeling more freedom in America, and feeling like he was finally becoming a semblance of "normal". He felt good. He felt… amazing.

"That's awesome, Greyson," Isaac says with a wide smile. "I'm so happy to hear."

"Thank you." Greyson wasn't smiling back.

"So… why the appointment?" Isaac asks finally. Greyson slumps slightly, shrugging. "Okay… let's talk about how it's going at home. It's the holidays. You have a tendency of having a harder time with Christmas since your Dad passed."

"Yeah," Greyson sniffs. "It's… it's tense. Mum and I fought last night."

"Would you like to share why?"

"Because I'm tired," Greyson insists, perhaps a little too aggressively. Isaac doesn't let his reaction to the outburst show. "I-I can't keep living the way she insists upon. I-I think she's stuck in-in 2012, where Dad is sick, and Wes, Phoebe and I are all gross little kids who bring deadly germs into the house, and if the house doesn't smell like a hospital, we're all gonna die. It's exhausting."

Isaac hums, nodding quietly. Greyson frowns. He hates when he does that.

"I know it sounds hypocritical. I know I might go overboard sometimes too— if I'm stressed, I clean. I keep up on laundry a little more than normal college kids, and I care about cleaning supplies. Whatever. But she pushes it all on me and makes me out to be as bad as she is. I-I was on my trip with my boyfriend, and she called, and she told me she was so proud I left the house because I've *always been so agoraphobic* , when she's the one who barely gets through the work day without misting her coworkers with bleach."

"You and your mother have very similar trauma responses," Isaac states.

So simply. So easily, he summed it all up into nine words.

Similar trauma responses . Greyson wants to scoff. He wants to tear his hair out. He wants to leave.

“And you have had the success of pushing your own limits, and you’ve worked to overcome your fears. And she has been stuck in a house that looks like 2012,” Isaac continues. Greyson nods. “It isn’t your fault that she is becoming insufferable, but neither is it hers. You outgrowing her bubble is part of the expected trajectory of having children, and yet, it is the one that many parents struggle with the most. Learning to let go can be a challenge. If there is anyone who understands that, it’s you.”

Greyson felt like that’s all he’s done as of late. Learn to forgive himself. Learn to let go of his grudges. Learn to release his fear.

“She reacted weird to me having a boyfriend, too,” Greyson murmurs. “And-I don’t know. I don’t think she meant it to sound as terrible as it did, but… it sounded bad. And it felt awful. And I just… I’m stressed enough as is trying to keep this relationship quiet for Cameron’s safety. The last thing I need is my mother giving her shitty input.”

“I think you need to figure out who this secret is for,” Isaac states. “Truth hurts, Greyson. It does. It burns like a bitch going down. But it’s a pill everyone has to swallow. My worry with you… is that you have too many things on your plate, and too many past meals in your stomach, to handle one more thing.”

Stupid fucking metaphors.

“I’m not breaking up with Cameron,” Greyson says outright.

“I don’t expect you to. Not at all,” Isaac insists. “But I do expect you to accept those hard truths, and let them spill into your personal life. You need to have these tough conversations with your mother. She will loosen the reins. You and I both know Alice to be a very reasonable woman, and she is not a monster, she is just grieving. And you really need to… to talk to this boyfriend and make sure he knows how important you are. Not how important your secret is, but *you* .”

“Why can’t both be important?”

“They can,” Isaac shrugs. “But not equally. If this secret is something that will cost you your happiness, and if this secret could bring death to a relationship, then I need you both to be honest with yourselves

and understand that this secret isn't fair. It's not fair to you, nor your friends whom you love, or your mental health."

"There you go again," Greyson rolls his eyes. "Always back to mental health."

"Forgive me, son. It is my job to be concerned for it."

Greyson thinks he remembers why he hates therapy now. Not because of Isaac Rowland, or the dusty waiting room, or the strong emotions that stir in his chest, building up until the damn cracks and they all spill out. No— it's because he's right. Dad is right, and Dr. Rowland is right, and all those motherfuckers who make the idiom as popular as it is.

The truth hurts. And he will always walk away with a pain in his chest that replaced the old one.

Chapter End Notes

So.

Lil explosive here today.

Anyways hi how are u how are things ?? Im kinda impressed that im getting chapters out because my schedule is INSANE right now with 0 time to write (so dont judge shitty chapters) so the fact that 3 chapters have dropped since school started is lowkey impressive.

Any whomstdve. Heres your chapter. Until next time, folks!
-hayl (@ hayloftown on twitter!!)

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Spur of the moment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Christmas was fine.

Not good. Far from great. Just… fine.

Mum tried to set aside her grief and her worries for a single day, focusing solely on providing her remaining family with a good day. Greyson and Wesley helped cook. They all got presents, but they were most excited to watch Phoebe open hers. Nobody yelled, or cried, or lashed out. But it wasn't comfortable, either.

Greyson spent his morning avoiding eye contact with everyone. And, in the early afternoon, Cameron called. Mum saw the contact pop up on his phone, and watched as he rushed to answer immediately, leaving the room for a private conversation. Mum and Wesley sat in a tense silence for a long few moments.

"Are you really that concerned over him dating?"

"I'm concerned over the behavioral changes," Mum muttered back under her breath. "This just… isn't like him. It's like… like he turned into you."

Wesley couldn't help but notice the way she said *you* – with malice, distaste, and concern. Wesley bites his cheek, uncertain why she was so concerned over Greyson possibly turning out something like his older brother. For the longest time, he was his parent's pride and joy — sports, and good grades, and a charming personality… he was a father's dream and a mother's soft spot.

"What if the boy is changing him?" Mum continues. "What if-What if Greyson is-is in some terrible relationship where he's being pushed and prodded into becoming something he isn't? Greyson is– Wes, you know Grey is a fragile boy. I don't want to lose him to something like-"

“Are you saying this because he’s dating a man, or because he’s dating at all?” Wesley interrupts. Mum recoils. Wesley has never been the type to argue in defense of Greyson– he’s never been the one to lean in his favor. Mum was shocked to hear him not being so critical for a change.

“It has nothing to do with his sexuality, Wesley,” Mum says, her voice sharp, venomous. “I am paranoid of many things, but I am not homophobic, and I don’t appreciate you boys making me out to be that.”

“We’re not doing anything, Mum,” Wesley sighs. “Sometimes… sometimes you don’t say things in a way-”

“Mummy, Mum. Mum. Look at the doll house! It’s done! I finished it!” Phoebe interrupts, grabbing her mother’s hand and stopping the conversation in it’s tracks. It’s a good thing too– God forbid the holiday become worse.

Wesley doesn’t stop noticing his mother, though. In the same way he notices her every day. Notice the way she taps the sink handle three times after changing the temperature. Notice the way she pulls on the locked door handles three times. How she washes her hands with three rounds of soap. He wonders how many other compulsive behaviors she does when nobody is looking.

Of course Greyson isn’t as anxious as he once was— he’s finally gotten out of the environment that he grew in. He’s finally breaking through the shell of their mother’s mental illness and their childhood trauma, finding a sense of independence. Wesley never adapted the way Greyson and Mum did— he was a little too old to adjust to Dad’s routine when Dad got sick, but a little too young to understand why he should’ve. But Greyson was a mindless robotic spawn of Dad’s illness, and he’s finally discovered his sentience.

Christmas is usually a harder holiday on the family. It’s hard on Mum, as she misses her husband a little deeper with every gift, every snow fall, and every big family meal. It will never feel the same. It's hard on the boys, who miss the Christmases where they fought over who would sit next to Dad when opening gifts, and who remembered baking cookies with Dad on Christmas Eve. And it’s especially hard on Phoebe, who has none of the memories and all of the grief. The tensions rise, and the guilt is heavy in the air as they experience yet another supposedly joyous day without Dad.

Greyson flourishes in the distraction that was Cameron's smooth, lethargic voice over the phone, discussing their Christmas mornings and both avoiding the topics that sit heavy on their minds: their families.

Cameron's holiday isn't much better.

In fact, it's probably much, much worse.

There's a fight before everyone was even downstairs. Cameron was first to wake, surprisingly enough, and waited on the couch watching the sunrise while breaking off pieces of muffin and considering falling back asleep.

Then Dad came down the stairs. Usually, Dad was the last one awake. As kids, the four children would usually have to tackle him, jump in the bed, scream that Santa came until he finally reluctantly opened his eyes and peeled himself out of bed. This year, though, he shuffled down the stairs, rubbing his eyes and getting a cup of coffee before returning to the living room. He stopped short at the sight of his son already awake.

"What's got you all anxious today?" Dad muttered, half-awake as he settled into his arm chair beside the Christmas tree. Dad flicks on the tree lights, lighting up his sullen expression.

"Nothing. Just… woke up early," Cameron lies. He barely slept last night, tossing and turning, thinking about Greyson, and Mom and Dad, and Callie, and Bryce and Aiden, and everything else he has to worry about. Eventually, his room felt like he was living in a museum, and he needed to change positions. Dad eyes him, seeing straight through his claims.

"If there's something going on, you'd tell me, right?"

Cameron grits his teeth, his jaw tensing in the dim light. Dad got his answer in the hesitation. No, no he would not.

Years. It's been years since Cameron and Dad truly fought. It was just before Cameron got into Brown– maybe even the day before. Cameron was not going to do anything with his life, Dad would claim. He was shit at the bottom of a hobo's shoe, and he wasn't going to get much further than the drug-dens of Miami. If Cam would just buck up and take the military route, maybe he would learn some discipline. Maybe he would be able to have a future.

Then, the acceptance letter came, in all it's beauty. It was in this gorgeous red envelope, thick with paperwork and packages to tell Cameron his precise offer and everything he could get out of his education at the Ivy League university. Cameron recalls sitting on his bed with the letter in his hands, weeping to himself as he realized, perhaps, he would finally make it. He would finally be something, be someone they would be proud of.

It feels like he's taken three big steps back.

"What happened with Greyson?"

"Nothing happened, Dad," Cameron sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"You said we would see him for the holidays, and we were under the impression that everything was fine, but-"

"Because everything is fine!" Cameron insists. "I'm fine! Greyson is fine! It's all-" Fine. Good. Dandy. "Just… drop it. I never said he would be here for the holidays. I brought him over once and you all latched on with this vice grip as if he's not-"

"So you did break up."

"I didn't say that!" Cameron groans. "We didn't break up. So would you please shut the hell up and leave me alone about it. He's home in England. I'm stuck here. That's all there is to it."

Cameron wasn't hungry anymore. He sets the remainder of his muffin on the table and runs his hands over his face. How does it always come back to this?

" *Stuck* ," Dad repeats. "We raised you, kid. We got you where you are. Us. You'd think our hard work would be, I don't know– rewarded? Even just a thank you would do-" Cameron scoffs. "You think I'm kidding? Do you think it was easy getting you here? Do you-"

"You didn't get me here," Cameron spits. " *You* didn't do shit. I did. I worked. I tried for so long to be something you could be proud of. You have no idea how hard it was growing up with you as a father-"

"And you have no fucking clue what it's like having you as my only son," Dad shot back. "I wanted a normal one. A good one. I wanted a son I could go play catch with and-"

The stairs creak.

Cameron looks over his shoulder to find his little sisters, both peering at them from behind the rail. Upon eye contact, they both scramble back upstairs where they couldn't be seen.

"I suck. I have done you so completely wrong, by getting you into this beautiful university that people bribe enrollment officers to get a spot in. You suffered through all of those tutors, and piano lessons, and every time we tried to-"

"You didn't get me into the university, Dad!" Cameron exclaims. Dad recoils. "I did! *Me* ! *My* talent. *My* grades. *My* effort. *I* wrote the college essay about how much it sucked being here. *I* have the brain they want to dissect and understand. *I* worked hard, and *I* pay the fucking money your GI bill doesn't. *I* do it all, Dad. You feel so fucking entitled to my success because you barely have any of your own. The only thing you've ever been good at is making your kids feel miniscule. We are not your soldiers. We are not an army of your creation. You are not the general who is responsible for winning a war. We are *people* . We are your children. Godforbid we expect you to support us."

"You are *unbelievable* ," Dad huffs. "You know what? Fine. If I failed you so fucking terribly, I'll be sure to never give my input again."

"Good," Cameron rolls his eyes, sitting back. "I'd hate to be a further disappointment as your only son."

Dad gets up and walks out the backdoor, slamming it behind him.

It took a while for him to come back– approximately as long as it took for Mom, Callan, and Calyx to work up the courage to inch down the stairs and see what mess had become of the explosive situation. Cameron avoided eye contact, avoided talking as a whole, for the remainder of the day. He just wanted to go home.

It was the next morning, sitting on the front steps with Clarke, that Cameron finally spilled. Venting to his older sister, he felt like he was fifteen all over again. Needing her as an outlet, needing her as a shoulder to lean on. Cameron doesn't owe his father shit, but Clarke deserved the world. She felt like the one person in this house to keep her head screwed on straight.

"I'm sorry," Clarke frowns, hugging her brother to her side. Cameron rests his head on her shoulder. "I can't imagine how frustrating this

has to be."

"The holiday is over. I'm about ready to just drive straight back to Rhode Island, not come back until next December," Cameron confesses. Clarke nods, blinking back tears. She hated these fights. She hated when the house became a warzone. And she hated saying goodbye. "There's this… this part of me that wants to do stupid shit, just to…"

"Rebel?" Clarke finishes for him. Cameron scoffs out a pathetic laugh.

"I feel like a kid again for thinking that way," Cameron mumbles. "Wanting to lash out…. Be reckless, just because I know Dad would say no."

"Remember when you got that smiley face tattooed on your elbow?" Clarke reminds. Cameron laughs more. "Is it still there?"

" *Tattoos are permanent, y'know* ," Cameron mocks his mother's voice, pulling up his sleeve to show the faded stick-n-poke just above his elbow joint. Just two eyes and a crooked little mouth. It's a faded blue by now, and Cameron has always considered getting it covered up, or maybe just redone in a slightly better ink. There is character in its sloppy flaws, though. There's fond memories of sitting in his friend's room, everyone getting stupid little marks to stick around forever– stars, and smiley faces, and the sun.

"What even made you think that was a good idea?" Clarke asked, smiling as she traced her thumb over the crooked grin that matches the body it belongs to.

"Dunno… spur of the moment, I guess."

He's not sure why, but Wesley asked to get coffee before Greyson left again.

In the six years since Dad died, the two hadn't been alone for much more than a few minutes at best. Greyson was never invited to be near him, either. So when the text sat there, asking Greyson to go to a local cafe, he was confused to say the least.

But he did it. Something tugged and pulled until he finally got off his ass and decided to make this family thing work, one last time.

They sat at a table in a cozy-looking corner of the cafe, surrounded by

potted plants, paintings and a big mirror. Greyson wondered how long the cafe had been here. It seemed fairly popular with the locals for being noon on a Thursday. He wondered if this was another one of those common things he missed out on in his years of being quarantined to the house.

“How’s school?” Wesley asks, which almost makes Greyson laugh. He sounded like Dad. Rolling his eyes, Greyson sat forward on his elbows and grabbed his paper mug. “Yeah… that sounded about as ingenuine to me as it did to you.”

“Glad you noticed,” Greyson murmurs, sipping his coffee. His phone buzzes with a text from Cameron— he decided he would read it later. “It's fine, though… I have some good friends. I’m trying to stay out of trouble. Failing a bit, but…”

“I thought I noticed a new scar,” Wesley mentions, eyeing Greyson's lip. “Better not be the guy.”

“It’s not,” Greyson reassures. “Some… idiots who think they’re better than everyone. They got what was coming to them, though. Pretty sure they’re all expelled or something stupid…”

“Good,” Wesley nods, his fingers fidgeting. “I didn’t mean anything by the guy comment. I just-“

“You’re being a big brother. I get it,” Greyson cracks a sad smile. “I appreciate you looking out for me.”

“It’s about time I started trying,” Wesley chewed his cheek. “I guess… I guess I never realized how hard you had it.”

“Don’t do that-“

“What?”

“Act all… nicey-nice. Apologetic,” Greyson tenses up. “I…I don’t like it. I don’t deserve it. I know why you’re upset with me, and you deserve to be mad— I hate that Mum and Phoebe aren’t mad. I’m mad.”

“You didn’t mean to-“

“But I did,” Greyson sighs, running a hand over his face. “I didn’t mean to have him die. I didn’t mean to cost us all a Dad. But I did. I got him sick. It was my fault. I have to make reparations.”

For a long while, Wesley doesn't respond. In a way, that feels worse than if he just yelled in the first place. He'd rather Wesley take out all his anger and resentment on him, take out the years of grief and pain and push them through Greyson's skin with thumbtacks. It's the least he deserved.

"I appreciate you taking accountability," Wesley says in a tense, low tone. Like it pains him. "But I let myself brew in that anger for so long that it's poisoning the rest of my life. I… I need to be better. I need to have something left of him, and Phoebe's still just a kid… so I guess you're the last I got."

Greyson closes his eyes, running a hand over his face.

"I… I've been keeping something from you," Wesley confesses in a hushed tone. Greyson peers up again, nervous to hear what this might be now. Wesley reaches into his jacket, pulling out a piece of paper.

No, not even. Just a sticky note. Folded up, missing it's "sticky", Wesley unwraps it from itself and looks at the paper for a long few seconds, Greyson anxiously awaiting his turn to see it. He felt that this wasn't the time to push his brother any harder.

"It's… it's his last note," Wesley whispered. Greyson's face fell. "One of my last conversations with him while we were in the hospital. Before he… y'know. He asked me for a pen and scribbled it down. I don't know where you were… but it was just him and I… when he meant for this to be for all of us. But I've kept it to myself."

"What does it say?" Greyson leans forward in anticipation. On instinct, Wesley leans back.

Greyson has a habit of ruining things. Of being a tornado that blows through, destroying lives and families as he goes. He has a history of being destructive without meaning to. And this… this is the one thing he hadn't touched yet.

Greyson wants to demand it, to rip it from Wesley's hands. Scream *he was my Dad too.* He wants to punch Wesley in the mouth for hiding something like this, and he wants to throw a fit.

But Wesley is trying. And Greyson will be damned if he lets Wesley be the bigger person.

Studying the shaky handwriting for one last moment, anticipating it to be torn to shreds, Wesley finally places the note down before his little

brother.

It was an unimpressive little thing. The least-worthy “last words” a guy could have. Greyson sat there, contemplating the message.

Be good to one another :)

-Dad

“That’s it?” Greyson whispers, smoothing out the creases in the paper, as if he could feel Dad’s fingers doing the same thing. Tracing the pen ink as if he can hear it get scratched in. “That’s all he wrote?”

“He was dying, Greyson…” Wesley reminds. Greyson felt the tears pooling, and he pushes the note closer to his brother, out of his reach. Greyson looks to the window, to the light, to anything and anywhere but his brother. “I’m sorry…”

Greyson sniffles, a lone tear racing down his cheek. He goes to wipe it away with his sleeve. Wesley grabs a handful of napkins to assist, which only made them spring to his face quicker, in rapid succession. Crying quietly at the table, Wesley stands and moves to Greyson’s side, running a hand over his shoulders.

“I’ve been awful to you for years. He asked one thing of me, and I screwed it up. I’m sorry.”

“Why now?” Greyson blubbered out between quiet sobs. “Why here? What makes this-this so-“

“You, Greyson,” Wesley emphasized, sinking down beside Greyson, hip to hip. “Because-because you’re growing. You’re grown. And the longer I hate you, the more I hate everything, and I can’t do it. I can’t keep watching you suffer alone, and I can’t keep feeding Mum’s OCD, and I can’t keep pretending like Dad didn’t hurt me by making those his last words. Greyson- Grey, Dad knew you would blame yourself. He knew I would blame you. He knew it and his dying wish was to get the fuck over it, and we’re failing. I don’t want to fail him anymore.”

Greyson looks up at his big brother with glassy red eyes. Wesley’s jaw trembles, tears brimming but never spilling. Greyson’s shoulders shake as he flung his arms around his brother for a crushing hug, the two leaning on one another the way they should’ve been for the past six years. The way they haven’t in all 20-some-odd years they’ve been brothers.

In this embrace, they make a pact to start fresh. Start anew.

“No fighting,” Wesley mumbled. “I won’t-I won’t be a dick.”

“I won’t be pushy,” Greyson muttered back. “No more bitching and whining.”

“That’s gonna be hard for you.”

“Shut up,” Greyson punches his brother in the arm, sniffling. He wipes his face on his sleeve, looking up at Wesley again. He was smiling to himself, looking at the note. He glances at Greyson, and that kind smile, that one that almost looks like Mum’s, becomes something more… devious. Phoebe-like. “What?”

“How do you feel about tattoos?”

Five hours later, the brothers walk into their mother’s home with lighter hearts, dry eyes, and saran-wrapped arms. The boys share a look before they touch the doorknob. Wesley gives his little brother a short nod, and pushes it open, taking the lead.

Mum is in the kitchen, finishing dinner. Phoebe was doing homework at the table.

“Which one of you is it?” Mum calls from the kitchen.

“Both of us,” Wesley says back. There’s a beat of silence before Mum says-

“Alright. Go shower and wash up for dinner, I’m almost-“

Greyson and Wesley walked into the kitchen, still in their outside clothes, without any attempt to move toward the bathrooms. Mum looks up, eyeing them both nervously.

“Boys. You know the drill-“

“No more, Mum,” Wesley says calmly. Mum’s face gets pink, and she shifts uncomfortably. “Take a breath. We’re all fine-“

“You know my routine, Wessy. Go clean up.”

“Mum?” Greyson spoke gently. Mum looks at him with nervous eyes. “I… I spoke with Dr. Rowland the other day. I think… I think we

should call a family meeting. I think we should talk."

"After you go clean up. At-at least get changed. You don't know what you were sitting in, or-or if someone bumped you on the-"

"Mum," Wesley touches her elbow, and she flinches. "C'mon. Let's sit."

They hadn't done a family meeting since before Dad died. Since before Phoebe was old enough to voice her own opinions. And yet, here they all sat. Two boys, a girl, and one remaining parent. Mum flinched when the boys put their outside-clothing on her dining chairs, and she eyed their hands every few seconds.

But the conversation started, and for once, there was no yelling. No shouting. No accusations. There's a sticky note in the middle table, and Wesley and Greyson break their mother's heart with permanent ink marked on their bodies, reading ' *be good to one another :)* ' in Gregory Hampton's handwriting. Greyson's, below the crook of his inner elbow in small font. Wesley's on the inside of his bicep, thick, large, proud.

Mum wept. She cried out her heart and soul, and she bled her pain into the table after years of trying to hold strong. She confesses to seeing a psychiatrist, who had diagnosed her with PTSD and OCD, and she apologizes through tears as she made herself as tiny as could be. She confesses to feeling so incredibly lonely, no matter who she's with, and she confesses to her fears, every last one of them. Scared of Phoebe coming home from school with RSV and dying. Scared of Greyson getting sick all the way across the world with no way to get to him. Scared of Dad's shitty genes being passed down to any of her children. Scared she will lose them all, and she will be the last one standing.

Phoebe murmurs her truth. She tells their mother her difficulty living in such an intensive household, and the way it affects her. At least, to the best of her ability. She tells Mum that it's impossible to keep friends. She tells Mum that she feels crazy every time she comes home and has to do a thorough scrub of everything before touching anything. And most importantly: she tells Greyson and Wesley how lonely it is, being the only one who doesn't remember Dad.

"I miss him too," she whimpered. "I miss him, and I don't even know who he is. I know he's got Grey's smile, and-and Wes's laugh, but I never get to see them both because you two are always fighting or

avoiding each other. I miss Dad and the closest I have to one both run from me too…”

Greyson cried and held his little sister that much tighter.

She’s so little, and yet, she’s experienced so much. She knows too much.

The conversation keeps going until whatever Mum was cooking sits cold, and Wesley offers to order pizza. Mum didn’t like that idea. The rest of them did. And then, the conversation started again.

It was never just Greyson, alone in his suffering. He knew that, too. He knew Wesley was grieving. And he knew Mum was traumatized. And he knew Phoebe was so, so lost without someone she barely knew.

Greyson looks down at his spur of the moment decision, scratched into his arm. He wonders what his friends will say when he gets home. He wonders what Cameron will say.

He held on just a little bit tighter. One last hurrah, he tries to forgive. He tries to start anew.

Chapter End Notes

hmmm tattoos :))))))

anyways. hello. happy weekend. i hope this chapter suffices. and to my rbtl readers: it is coming eventually. i am just on a brief pause figuring out what to say next

Until next time !! o7
haylen hayl hayloftown

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

New year, new me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson lands in Boston just before New Years.

It felt good to get out of England. It felt good to close the chapter on him and his brother's feuding. It felt good to move on, and he was… well… ready to move on. Time to get going with the rest of his life.

Campus was empty. Classes don't start until the end of January, meaning most kids are still away on break. Sports kids were the only ones coming back, ready to launch straight back into practice. Football guys crowd the dining hall lines with their broad shoulders and over-the-top voices, and the swimmers leave puddles of water trailing behind them in the entrance to the gym, and the tennis kids are running with the track kids.

Greyson, though…

He walks into his dorm and sets his things down, taking a deep breath of home. Everything still intact, everything as normal, he can feel relief in his own little controlled bubble.

"Hi Greyson!" Rowan says, clapping him on the shoulder and weaseling past him. "How was your holiday?"

Right at home.

"It was… something," Greyson says with a soft smile. He never thought he'd be so happy to see Rowan's stained hoodie, or a sock on the floor. "Already making messes?"

"Already complaining about my mess?" Rowan mocks, but picks up the socks and drops them in his hamper. He glances up at Greyson and furrows his eyebrows. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm not looking at you like anything."

"…sure," Rowan rolls his eyes, flopping down on his bed. "Well, I was gonna go get lunch with Luca. You down? We wanted to talk about getting a group apartment in the fall."

"Yeah," Greyson exhales. "Yeah. I'd like that."

Rowan just narrows his eyes at his best friend and decides against questioning him about the odd behaviors he exhibited. Rowan was just happy to see Greyson happy. It's a pretty rare occurrence around here.

Greyson settles his belongings and unpacks as they wait for Luca to turn up. Small talk passes between them as they do– Rowan's flight back was really cool because he had a layover in Chicago that was long enough to go explore the city for a day. His step mom also sent him back to Rhode Island with lots of cookies to give his friends for the holiday, which Greyson was excited about. His stepmom was notorious for making some god-tier cookies.

Luca walks in and stops short at the sight of Greyson, looking between the two roommates for a moment.

"You coming with?" Luca asks hopefully.

"If you're cool with that," Greyson confirms. Luca breaks out in a grand smile and practically bounces where he stood, demanding they take off for lunch right that instant before Greyson could change his mind.

Perhaps, in light of the new year, following the year he's had, the life he's had, Greyson is just ready for a change. Ready to evolve. He always hated the phrase " *new year, new me* " , but maybe this would be a good excuse.

Cameron's drive back up north was rough.

Goodbyes were hard. He had a hard time letting his sisters go, and he hates parting ways after a fight with his parents, but they were both too stubborn to apologize… thus, Cameron drove, and the men of the house stayed feuding. It wouldn't be the first time they both walked away from a fight without resolve. If anything, it felt like a perfect mirror of his childhood, and the exact reason he moved as far as he did for college. With barely a goodbye, he left his parent's house once more, wishing he had the power of teleportation so he could be back in his true home: surrounded by the people who care about him.

Every hour felt like forever. He called Greyson, called Rowan, even called Clarke at one point. It didn't matter— the clock was against him, and it wouldn't go any faster. The roads were empty, surprisingly. It's the day before New Year's Eve, and he anticipated more traffic in light of everybody returning home from their holiday festivities, but alas, he's alone on the open highway, trying not to get a speeding ticket as he races the clock on his GPS app with his estimated arrival being New Years Eve morning.

He drove through the night without care. He wasn't feeling all that tired after sleeping in as late as he did, and he also wasn't all too excited to sleep, either. He's been having a hard time sleeping since his fight with Dad. Too many things on the brain, he thinks. Or maybe that's Clarke's voice in his head again, nagging him to take care of himself.

He pulled up into his parking space in front of the frat at 12:45 in the afternoon of December 31st. His heart is racing in his sternum, though, he's not sure why. He should feel relieved to be home. He should be happy that he's not in Florida anymore, that he's out of his parents house again with no need to return any time soon. He needs a break from them.

He carries his things inside with a huff, listening for the noise level to see just who was home. It's quiet. For a moment, he hopes, he's alone. No New Years party. No craze for alcohol and loud music and who they're sleeping with at midnight.

Cameron sets his bags down in the entryway and wades deeper into the house, peaking around all the corners. He's never heard the frat so quiet before. He knew he came home earlier than most, but… this was a little extreme. He could've sworn a couple of them would be here, avoiding their families for the holidays too.

He spots a guy sitting outside on the back porch, and he retreats to his belongings to bring them to his bedroom. Something told him not to proceed with an interaction right now.

He finally finds a few more people as he goes around– someone is upstairs, walking from his bedroom to the bathroom. The two made eye contact, but the other one looked away almost instantly. Cameron frowns and brings his stuff to his door. Taped to the wood is an envelope with his name scribbled on it in messy handwriting.

He carefully peels it off and opens the door, dropping his bags once

more. He takes a step in and suddenly realizes something was definitely, incredibly wrong.

Sam and Cameron's room was trashed.

Or, he supposes, Cameron's side was trashed. It's like they put up a tarp to protect Sam's side– Cameron's not entirely sure how else there would be such a crisp line between food and paint splatter and the precise cleanliness on Sam's end.

It smelled rancid– Cameron held his hand to his nose as he's overwhelmed by the scent of… coffee and mustard? He's not sure, until, of course, he pulled back the covers of his bed to see what else they messed up, to find a concoction of leftover food, mustard, relish, and alcohol all poured over his mattress. There's pasta sauce and coffee and paint and other substances Cameron doesn't want to know about splattering his walls, desk, nightstand, school bag– hell, even his football uniform. It smelled as though it had been there since he left for Florida two weeks ago. Judging by some of the mold, he might not be entirely wrong.

"What the fuck?" he mutters, looking to Sam's side again. It's so perfectly cleaned, like someone ran a mop over the floor to make sure none of it touched his stuff. As if Sam wouldn't be burdened by the smell of rotting food and what smells like something died…

Cameron looks down at the envelope in his hands. Peeling it open, he glances at what's inside. Just a single note, a little piece of paper with two words scribbled onto them:

Told you .

That's it.

Cameron grits his teeth, jaw trembling. He tosses the envelope aside and returns down the stairs, hunting down the figure on the back porch.

"The fuck did you do?" Cameron spits at Bryce. Bryce was busy smoking a cigarette on the steps, barely giving Cameron the time of day. "Why the fuck would you do that? What do you get out of-"

"Who says I did anything?" Bryce shrugs, flicking some ashes aside. "Loosen up, man. Get a drink. You're home."

"Fuck you."

Bryce scoffs and shakes his head, watching Cameron return inside. He goes to the fridge and finds an image there, pinned with a magnet of a red telephone box. Cameron looks over his shoulder at Bryce again, his hands trembling, then back at the photo.

It's of Greyson and Cameron at the bar just before the holidays… When they thought nobody was looking. When they thought they were alone. They thought they were safe. Pleasant smiles, eyes cartoonishly in love. Cameron rips the image down and throws it in the trash, whirling around to find Bryce standing there, leaning against the counter with a smug smile.

“So?”

“Mind your fucking business,” Cameron spits, going to walk past him. Bryce shakes his head with a smile.

“If you’re gonna go get that boytoy of yours,” Bryce calls over his shoulder. “Let him know we’re keeping our eyes on him, too.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Cameron slams the door behind him and runs. As fast as he could– faster than he ever would on the field. Faster than he could fathom in any other situation. Like his life depends on it. Like Greyson’s does. He wove through pedestrians and barely avoids getting hit by a car as he sprints straight for Greyson’s dorm. He needs to get out of here. He needs to keep them safe. It’s his fault if anything happens, and by god, he won’t let anything happen.

Greyson set his jacket down after his lunch with the guys, and his shoulders drop. Looking around the room— the cinder block walls, poorly painted white, the old wooden desks with slurs carved into them, the old mattress he’s slept in for three years straight— he realizes in a painstaking, horrible way, that this room has been more of a home than his mother’s house ever felt.

Not because he made it his own— because he didn’t. He had no posters, no flags, no decorations. He barely had pictures. Not because it was even his. It didn’t belong to him. The University could knock on his door and tell him he needed to move rooms tomorrow and he would have to just deal with it. No— this place is home because it’s freedom. Because he kicks his shoes to the side and doesn’t need to take a lysol spray to anything the outside world touches. Because he sits on his bed and isn’t thinking about Dad. Because he can be gross

and unhygienic and, yeah, maybe he feels weird about it, but it's not scary. Not anymore.

His shoulders relax, and a small smile crosses his face.

There's a soft knock on his open doorway. Rowan and Luca went back to Luca's room for something or another, so there's only one person it might be. Greyson glances over his shoulder and breaks out into a grand grin, laughing as Cameron slipped in the room and kicked the door shut.

"Jesus, I missed you-" Greyson chuckles, taking Cameron's face into his hands and smashing their mouths together. Greyson's arms slither around his partner's neck, stumbling back a few steps. "Hi. How was your drive?"

"Awful," Cameron mumbles between kisses, capturing Greyson's mouth again. "Boring, the whole way back."

"Oh, you poor thing," Greyson teases, pressing a kiss to his cheek, then his jaw. Cameron's heart is pounding, and he's out of breath from his run, but if Greyson noticed, he didn't say anything.

Cameron should tell him. He should spill it all, right now. Quickly, before anyone else gets hurt.

"I like the glasses," Cameron stammers out instead.

"I hate them," Greyson says back into Cameron's neck, suddenly grabbing them off his face and tossing them on his bed blindly. He forgot he was even wearing them. "Shut the fuck up and kiss me, will you?"

Cameron laughs and takes the open mouthed kisses Greyson was oh-so desperate for. Smiles, and tongues, and hot breath, and his hands—Greyson could live in this moment forever. Bask in this warmth. Lather the love and affection that he desperately needed these past two weeks deep into his skin until he-

The door clicks with a key, and it opens. Cameron and Greyson both yank away, but the damage was done.

Stood too close. Pink lips. Cameron, awkwardly scratching the back of his head in an attempt to look casual, and failing miserably. He was already caught by the frat. It was only a matter of time until this happened. Greyson was hiding a mortified smile behind his hand and

looking out the window.

And best of all: Rowan, stood hand-in-hand with Luca at the door, jaw on the floor.

“I-uh-“ Rowan stammers, then looks at Luca. He suddenly releases Luca’s hand and looks back at Cameron, who was sinking down into the chair at Greyson’s desk, head in his hands to hide how red his face was. Greyson couldn’t help it. A laugh spurts from his mouth, and he shakes his head. “I feel like I am seeing something I’m not supposed to.”

“Yeah, a little,” Greyson says through laughter. Cameron grabs a pen and hucks it at his boyfriend.

“I-I-“ Rowan looked at Luca again, who was snickering to himself. “Okay. I’m going to close the door. We’ll talk later.”

“Back to my room?” Luca offers.

“Bye Ro,” Cameron groans into his hands. The door shuts again, and Greyson starts laughing harder. He sunk onto the bed, clutching his stomach as giggles roll through him. Cameron held his breath, unsure what to say now.

Well.

“You motherfucker,” Cameron groans. “Stop laughing!”

You’re in danger , Cameron should say. *I’m getting targetted and you’re gonna get your ass kicked, and you’re laughing* .

“I can’t-“ Greyson heaves for breath, tears leaking as he lets out louder and louder giggles. Cameron loves his laugh so much. It’s hard to stay frustrated, hard to stay serious. Cameron pushes him into the mattress, pinning his hands above his head and caging his waist with Cameron’s knees. Greyson keeps laughing. “Oh my god. His face. He’s going to be so mad. He’s going to lose it on me. Oh my god-“ Greyson just keeps laughing. He’s barely getting his words out between giggles. “Did you-did you see his eyes?”

“Shut up,” Cameron grumbled. Greyson laughs harder, kicking his feet as Cameron hid his burning face in Greyson’s neck, kissing him while he’s there. “We’re not talking about this-“ *We should talk about Bryce. And Aiden and Liam. And who knows who else…*

“Oh, c’mon,” Greyson sniffles, trying to calm himself. “It’s-it’s funny. You gotta admit its fucking hilarious.”

“You keep this up and I’m leaving you here,” Cameron threatens, releasing his hands and sitting back on his knees. Greyson wipes his face in an effort to pull himself together. “I’ll leave you here to sort out yourself. See how hard you’re laughing when Rowan walks in on you working one out.”

“Cameron…” Greyson sighs, stifling his giggles. He presses himself up on his elbows. “Hey, hey… it’s alright. I mean… you never know. Maybe we can convince him he-“

“Oh my God-“ Cameron rolls his eyes and moves to stand up. Greyson grabs his hands quickly and holds him still.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Kiss me again, I’ll make it up to you-“ Greyson insists, pulling on Cameron’s hands and trying to lean back into the bed.

Cameron huffs, but gives into the request, letting Greyson hold onto his face as they resume their open mouthed kisses with eager fever. Cameron presses up on the hem of Greyson’s sweater until his cold fingers are slotting across Greyson’s ribs, and Greyson is letting out panted, excited breaths, pressing his hips up into Cameron’s.

One of Greyson’s hands slips from Cameron’s face, down his chest, flat against his sternum and feeling the rapid thump of Cameron’s heart. He’s never felt it race quite this hard. For a moment, he considered asking if Cameron was okay. For a moment, he thought about being serious. But then, Cameron sits forward more, and a moan slips out from Greyson’s lips as he kissed him more intensely, more purposefully. This is what he needed. Serious talk later. This now.

Greyson’s fingers slip into the button of Cameron’s jeans, and Cameron starts kissing down his neck. Stubble bristles against Greyson’s skin. Greyson closes his eyes, and all he can see is Rowan’s expression. Eyes bigger than the moon, and jaw hung open, so surprised, like he had just seen Abe Lincoln riding a unicorn down the hallway.

Greyson couldn’t help it. The laughter spills out.

“Alright,” Cameron sighs. “You ruined the moment.”

“No!” Greyson whines as Cameron swung his leg off of Greyson’s hips,

buttoning his jeans. “No, hey, hey— I’m sorry. I-“ he’s still giggling, so he doesn’t seem very sorry. He grabs Cameron’s hands as he tries to walk out, skidding to his feet and sliding in front of him. “I’m sorry.”

Cameron frowns, but it was hard to stay angry. It was hard to stay anything but helplessly melted with Greyson right there. Greyson’s hands felt so warm in his. And he just has the taste of Greyson’s tongue lingering.

“You said you’d make it up to me,” Cameron mumbles. Greyson nods. “How do you plan on doing that?”

“Well…” Greyson hums, one hand still holding Cameron’s, the other creeping up his wrist, then along his beltline, and over the waistband of Cameron’s jeans again. “I could…”

“I doubt these floors have been cleaned since you left,” Cameron scoffs. It’s like Greyson’s own personal dirty talk— Cameron, concerning himself with the cleanliness of his bedroom.

“But I’d still do it for you,” Greyson insists, every blink fluttering his eyelashes in a painstakingly beautiful way. “Sit down.”

“If Rowan-“

“I think we scared him off for a bit,” Greyson reassures. Cameron’s hands tremble with excitement as Greyson inches him backwards until his hips bump the desk. “If you want to stand-“

“You are such a fucking trip,” Cameron mumbles, running a hand through his hair as Greyson rereleased the button and zipper to Cameron’s trousers in one instant motion. Greyson bites the corner of his mouth, smiling up at Cameron. “Well? Do it. On your knees, idiot.“

Greyson shakes his head with a smile, letting his knees rest against the tile floor. For once, he didn’t care about the dirt, the mopping, the vacuum. None of it. It didn’t even cross his mind. It was just Cameron, and only Cameron.

Chapter End Notes

> Okay, I want to preface with: I know this chapter was slightly more explicit than usual without being totally NSFW-- I am not really that comfortable with writing raunchy nsfw stuff, but I do imply it heavily, especially in a story that is FWB to lovers. I hope that doesn't bother anyone. This fic is rated as mature, so I

suppose that it's up to you whether you choose to read it or not.

Idk. I'm an anxious person. Just wanted to get that out of the way. This anxiety is probably why I refuse to write outright NSFW lmao.

Anywhooooo... hi. i hope this chapter was good enough for yall. i have been busy, as you guys know, but i'm making time where possible to give you guys this lil world of ours. i love this story a whole lot and i am glad to see you guys liking it too. it's currently my most read fic, and it's nearing 50K, which is insane to me. So thank you for the love on this one

Until next time, folks...
Hayl (@ hayloftown on twitter!!)

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Elephant in the room

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's a million ways they could address the elephant in the room, but currently, Cameron was far too comfortable tucked into Greyson's side under the covers of his bed, not thinking about any of it.

Not Rowan, who walked in on them. It was bound to happen eventually. Not his father, who he was once again on bad terms with. Not even the frat, who had trashed his room (and subsequently left the mess for Sam to clean up). No— none of it mattered, because Cameron's face was tucked into Greyson's shoulder, and they rang in the new year together. Side by side.

In the early light of the morning, surrounded by one another, bed sheets, and the brisk breeze blowing in through the drafty windows, they laid side by side in peaceful quiet, only making occasional conversation as they see fit. They didn't need to fill the silence. They were comfortable as is. Greyson mumbled about how Cameron needed a shower, and Cameron laid there for a while, playing with Greyson's hands, thinking.

That is, until, he noticed the smudges of black.

"Greyson?" Cameron murmurs, sitting up.

"Hm?" Greyson mumbles back, eyes still closed. He felt Cameron tug on his hand a little, and he realized immediately what was about to come.

"Did you get a tattoo?"

Greyson's face flushes pink, and he lays his arm across his eyes. Cameron held the inked skin captive still, though. He inspected the calligraphy closely. Then, he smiles.

"You got a fucking tattoo. My germaphobe boyfriend who could barely sit at a restaurant table a few months ago got a *tattoo* !"

“You’d be surprised, the parlors are actually very clean and-”

“Shut up! I’m proud of you, idiot!” Cameron shakes him lightly, making Greyson laugh, a blush coating his cheeks. “How was it? Did it hurt? What does it mean? Was anyone with you? I can’t believe you got a tattoo and didn’t say anything!”

Greyson snickers as Cameron pressed a kiss to his cheek, then jaw, then forehead, then other cheek, and finally, his lips. Greyson winds an arm around Cameron’s neck and welcomes the embrace wholeheartedly.

“I just… did it,” Greyson murmurs against Cameron’s mouth. If Cameron didn’t know better, he would dig more, beg for more. There was a finality to Greyson’s statement though. He had nothing to say, other than the fact that he did it.

“Would you get another one?” Cameron asks next, hoping it’s a safer question, skirting by like a ghost, rather than a mouse, startling the elephant in the room that is Greyson’s brain.

“Maybe,” Greyson hums, a haunting hint of deviousness in his smirk. “Why? You wanna go get one?”

“It's about time I get something professionally done, instead of some lame stick-n-poke…” Greyson fake gags and pushes Cameron by the chest off of him. “What!”

“You did not get a stick-n-poke.”

“When I was a kid, yeah!” Cameron shows off the crooked smiley, to which Greyson grimaces.

“Do you have any idea how unsanitary and terrible of an idea that-“

“Yeah, yeah, *mom* . A little late. Clearly nothing happened if both the tattoo and I are still around,” Cameron says, clambering back over so his thighs were planted on either side of Greyson’s ribcage. Greyson instinctively rest one hand on his leg, but the other was tentatively reaching to graze over the old tattoo. “I always wanted to get one. A proper one. I can’t believe you beat me to it. The fucking goody-two-shoes got a tattoo before me.”

“Gotta start trying harder,” Greyson murmurs, sitting back slightly and rolling his torso and hips to get comfortable under Cameron’s weight.

Cameron presses his hand into the headboard, just above Greyson's head, and leans down so their breaths are shared and their faces are so close, Greyson could just tip his chin up to kiss him. His breath shakes as he realizes he can feel the movement of Cameron's mouth with passing words he definitely wasn't paying attention to. He was more attentive to Cameron's body pressing all the right buttons, to his arms so carved out above Greyson's head, his chest, bare and soft, muddled with a few hickeys on his shoulders and one over his heart.

He realizes Cameron's mouth stopped moving, and his eyebrows were raised expectantly.

"Huh?" Greyson's hand trembles as he unwittingly moves his fingers up Cameron's chest, over the chain necklace that dangled, to his throat. Cameron laughs.

"I was saying," Cameron dips his lips down so they graze Greyson's ear. "We should probably get moving, before Rowan walks in on us again."

"Oh…" Greyson didn't mean to sound so disappointed. Cameron laughs again, attaching his lips to the crook just below Greyson's earlobe. Greyson shakily wound an arm around his neck, pressing his hips up into Cameron. "Five more minutes."

"I don't know if we have five minutes, bud," Cameron mumbles, but his mouth still attaches to Greyson's neck. Greyson's second hand slips down Cameron's torso and between the two of them. Cameron's breath hitched too. "Fuck you."

"That's my intention."

They don't get more than a few minutes of peace before Greyson's phone is exploding on the nightstand, and Cameron's is quick to follow. Cameron whines but eventually rolls off of Greyson, scrounging through Greyson's room for his clothes. Greyson rolls to grab his phone and answer the next call to come through.

"Hello?" Greyson greets groggily on speaker-phone. Cameron pulls his shirt over his head and rolls his eyes.

"Will you two please stop fucking and come to breakfast with us? We have a lot to talk about," Luca demands.

"We're not–" Greyson began, then stopped. They all knew it would be a lie. "You're so fucking annoying. Hang on. I'm getting up."

“Bring lover boy. Our first official double date in the books,” Luca demands.

“Luca!” Rowan complains from the background. “This is so awkward-”

“I agree,” Cameron mumbles, shrugging on his jacket and looking at his reflection in the mirror. Greyson rolls out of bed.

“We’ll meet you in the dining hall in twenty,” Greyson offered.

“Make it ten. You’re not getting another session in.”

“Luca,” Rowan groans again.

Greyson hung up and tosses his phone aside. He pulls out the first articles of clothing he sees and goes to pull it on, but Cameron stops him.

“No,” Cameron yanks the shirt from Greyson’s hands. “You are not wearing my shirt when we go out to see our friends the morning after they caught us.”

“That’s not your shirt,” Greyson frowns, taking it back.

“Yes it is!” Cameron scoffs. “I don’t even remember you taking it– you idiot. It’s mine. Look. It says fuckin’ Tampa University on it. When did you go to Tampa?”

“Didn’t we go together?” Greyson asks, despite knowing damn well he got caught.

“We went to Kissimmee, dipshit.”

“Okay, well, this is mine now,” Greyson says, folding the shirt and sticking it back in his closet. “Until you give me a receipt to prove it's yours.”

“You’re a dick.”

“You love my-”

The first several minutes were quiet.

Cameron sat next to Greyson. Luca next to Rowan, both across the table from one another. They ended up going to a cafe rather than the campus dining hall in an effort to avoid people they know, but it

didn't do much. They were still a short walk away from the dorms.

Greyson was struggling to hold it together. He sipped his coffee every time he thought he would burst into hysterics. Cameron, on the other hand, was completely mortified, hiding behind his menu as he tried to find something that didn't make him want to throw up more than he already did.

"So," Luca starts after too long. "How was your New Years?"

Rowan elbows Luca in the ribs. Greyson snorts into his coffee and instinctively reaches for the napkins. Cameron shrinks deeper in the booth, hiding more behind the menu.

"We had fun. Though, we might need to figure something out for when Santiago comes back. I don't know how much he'll appreciate us taking over the dorm."

"Well, we're not using mine. You guys can have it. All yours," Rowan murmurs, looking anywhere but his friends.

"Oh, c'mon, man," Greyson scoffs. "Like you and Luca haven't-"

"No! We haven't! And I'm terrified of knowing just how many times you have in my room!"

"Our room."

"That somehow makes it worse," Rowan huffs.

"What, you want me to get a hotel every time I want to spend time with my boyfriend?"

"Go to his house! The frats are known for people sleeping together on whatever surface they find."

"Ah, yes, the frats, were I got my ass kicked, and he-"

"Greyson," Cameron interrupts harshly. Greyson shuts up. Rowan blinks a few times and looks away. "What he's trying to say is, Ro, the frats aren't safe. And I promise, we… we haven't been defacing any of your stuff. Greyson barely lets me touch his things, nevermind would we go near yours."

Rowan nods slowly, taking a deep breath.

"Are you mad?" Cameron finally asks.

“Mad that my two best friends are sleeping together? No. Mad you didn’t tell me? Not really. Maybe a little offended. But I think-I don’t know. I don’t know. Where the hell does this even come from? You went from not being able to stand each other to… to being a couple?”

“I don’t know how it happened either. I still don’t really like him,” Greyson comments, sipping his coffee again, and thanking the waitress as she brought some appetizer fruit salad. It was a little funny. A fruit salad for the table that makes up a fruit salad. Greyson glances at Cameron and gives a small smile. “Kidding.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cameron blinks a few times, stabbing a strawberry with his fork. “It hasn’t been long, if it makes you feel any better. Just over a month.” Rowan nods slowly. “Everything before that was…”

“I definitely didn’t like you then,” Greyson chuckles. “You didn’t shower.”

“You definitely liked having me in the shower though,” Cameron mutters back. Rowan pelts Cameron with balled up napkins. “Sorry, sorry.”

“You are so gross. That’s my roommate, man! He’s like my little brother.”

“I’m older than you,” Greyson glared.

“Okay, and? You’re still an incompetent prick who can’t order for himself in a restaurant or stick up for himself from bullies.”

“Like Cameron is any better,” Greyson huffs. Eyes go back to Cameron.

“It’s nothing,” Cameron insists.

“Yeah? So everything's settled at the frats now? We’re safe to hang out without worrying if someone will jump us?”

The mess of my bedroom says otherwise , Cameron thinks. He bites his cheek and looks back down at the menu, suddenly losing what little was left of his appetite.

The conversation goes in circles– from Greyson and Cameron, to Luca and Rowan, then back to Cameron, then Rowan, then Greyson, then Luca. They talk about their vacations. Cameron doesn’t tell them that he’s fighting with his Dad again. Greyson doesn’t tell them that he and

his Mum barely spoke to each other until the very end, or that he and Wesley worked things out. In fact, Greyson doesn't say much of anything about his vacation– just shows off the tattoo, which has both of their friends also cheering with pride for their germaphobic friend who would never sit in this booth just a few months prior, nevermind dare set foot in a tattoo shop.

The elephant in the room isn't nearly as crushing in size. It's like they've led it outside into a proper enclosure. Still the center of attention. Still awkwardly there, without rhyme or reason, and a whole lot of work to discuss. But they can breathe again. They are a little bit closer to normalcy.

Cameron wonders if he will ever achieve normalcy.

Chapter End Notes

> Hi. I know it's been a while since I posted-- almost three weeks. I'm sorry for that. For my RBTL enjoyers or twitter followers, you'll know I've had a crazy few weeks, between school, having to say goodbye to my lovely little Sassy-cat, whom I had spent every day of the last eleven years with, and my brother coming home from deployment. Crazy stuff.
>
> I'm sorry for the sub-par chapter, and I am trying my absolute hardest to wrap things up. I don't want to drag the story out for the sake of more chapters. That being said, I don't really know when the conclusion might be. It could be in three chapters, it could be ten, it could be forever from now. We'll see when the time comes.
>
> Also, fun fact: this chapter is 10 pages long, which is very short for my standard, BUT that means the Speak of the Devil document is now exactly 700 pages long. So, congrats on reading a 700 page book (so far).
>
> Anyways. Hi. Welcome back, and thank you for your patience.
> until next time.
> hayl (hayloftown on twitter !)

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Hope for the best, anticipate the worst...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Cameron returned to the frat, he anticipated the worst, and hoped for the best. And yet, it was still worse than he expected.

No one spoke when he walked in the door. Cameron already knew why. He was outcasted already— it didn't matter what the guys thought. It didn't matter if he was Jesus Christ reincarnated, they were afraid to be on his side. They were afraid to look in his direction. Afraid of Bryce.

His room was clean when he walked in, another bad sign.

Not perfect, but clean. The mess was picked up since he left, and Sam's bed was slept in. Cameron felt guilt wash through him. He set his things down and sat on the edge of his bed, running a hand over his face.

What now?

They had a game tonight. He came back to grab his things and go to the field, but he didn't know how the hell he would play today knowing a massive target was painted on his back. Something told him that the locker rooms wouldn't be a safe haven, and being out in the open would be even worse. There's not a thick enough helmet, or enough padding for his joints in the world to protect him from the brutality that can be his peers.

The door opens, and Sam walks in silently. Cameron wants to make eye contact. He wants Sam to say something. Anything. To complain about the mess, or ask where he was last night, or anything else. Instead, Sam simply grabs his things, stuffing them into a duffle bag, all without saying a word.

"You too?" Cameron asks quietly, looking down at his trembling hands. He wipes his sweat on his jeans. He's nauseous.

“No,” Sam murmurs. “Not me. Just…”

Scared.

Cameron nods, blinking rapidly. *Me too* .

“We can talk more later,” Sam whispers, as if he’s afraid someone had their ear to the door. “When people aren’t around.”

Cameron didn’t hold onto hope. ‘ *When people aren’t around’* doesn’t exist for them. They’re in a fraternity. They’re on a football team. They go to an Ivy League school. Everywhere they turn, someone with shitty ideals is there. Safety is slim pickings.

They’re goners.

Cameron is one of the last ones to arrive at the locker room before the game. The moment the door swung open and he walked through, a hush fell over the crowd. What was once laughter, elbowing one another, joking about their after-party, became a tense silence, shuffling to see who can get out the fastest. Cameron’s eyes flickered through the room apprehensively. No one made eye contact. Even Rowan seemed shifty and uncomfortable. Not necessarily because of Cameron, but uncomfortable and silent nevertheless. Cameron huffs, setting his bag down and turning to face the lockers to change. He can feel them gawking at his back– as if they’re amazed he had the gall to still change in front of them. Like he was a predator, and they were scared he might strike.

He shrugs his jersey over the padding and tucks his helmet under his arm. He wraps up his hands with sports tape before gloves, turning to go march out.

They were still staring at him. This time, they don’t pretend not to.

“So we’re doing this,” Cameron says with a huff, letting his helmet dangle from his fingertips. “I don’t know what they told you-”

“They didn’t need to tell us anything,” one of his teammates murmurs. “We saw.”

“And?” Cameron raises an eyebrow. There’s a break of silence. “My life shouldn’t affect your behavior. So long as I’m still captain, you still have to play the fucking game with me. I don’t give a shit what you think. Either play or get benched. I promise, someone else would love to fill your place.”

With that, Cameron slid past his teammates and out the door, over to the tunnel that leads to the field. The cheer team, mascots, and coaches all stood around out there. The students side-eye him uncomfortably. Cameron wanted to scream.

Up on the stands, Greyson sat with Luca, leaning against the barricade to watch the teams flood the field. Luca checks his phone as they prepare to start and frowns, furrowing his eyebrows. Greyson didn't notice. Instead, he sat with astonishment as the game kicked off, with his boyfriend taking the lead.

The two are a world away, and he didn't even know it.

The game seemed to be going okay. They aren't operating as smoothly as they typically do, but they're still performing well. Cameron makes some amazing throws and runs some good distances both, and the rest of the team seems to be doing okay too (as far as Greyson knows, at least… he's not very football savvy). The clock was ticking down to halftime, and there's a pause called– the teams circling up into meetings. Greyson watched Cameron's face in particular. He was drenched in sweat, red in the face, and as he watched his teammates speak, he was scowling. Greyson frowned.

"What's gotten into him?" Greyson murmurs, watching Cameron roll his eyes and pace away from the group before they're even done speaking. He tugged off his helmet and paced toward the bench for a breather.

"Uh… maybe this?" Luca says back, showing Greyson his phone. A text from Rowan (at least, that's who Greyson presumes it is, judging by the cowboy and heart emoji) reads: *the entire team knows about Cameron. Idk how. They're all turning on him tho*

"Shit," Greyson sat up straighter, his grip on the barricade tightening.

He wants to call down to his partner, find a way to reassure him, but something tells him it would do more harm than good. The game is called to resume for the final thirty seconds, and Cameron strides onto the field, looking defeated and angry still. Rowan clapped him on the shoulder, but Cameron moved away from him.

"This is going to get ugly," Greyson murmurs.

"Yes, it is," a third voice said from behind Greyson suddenly. Greyson stood up straighter, looking over his shoulder.

Bryce.

Greyson's shoulders are rigid. He looks back to the field and avoids eye contact. He refuses to entertain the madness that is this loser's obsession with him.

"No smartass comments today?" Bryce asks, leaning against the fencing beside Greyson. Luca side steps, giving Greyson the opportunity to do the same. Bryce didn't seem to care. "I'm still under review. I'm not gonna hurt you."

"Not in the open you won't," Greyson murmurs. Bryce just smiled. "I doubt you'd throw a punch without your scapegoat here."

"Liam?" Bryce assumes. "He's trigger happy."

Greyson scoffs and focuses back on the game. Bryce is still talking– Greyson just tunes him out though. The clock starts again, and Cameron is taking steps back. He's planning on throwing the ball. There's a rush forward from the other team. The Bears don't seem all too keen on protecting their player, though. The quarterback is left undefended in a vast space from his left, and Cameron didn't have the time to run. He gets a helmeted head dived through his shins, and another one to his left side. He goes down, and they tumble. Two others jump on top, trying to pin him down. The timer goes off, calling for halftime.

Cameron felt like his life flashed before his eyes. He envisioned a painful death on that field as he watched several grown men sprint straight at him without care of injury or penalty.

The first sensation is the sharp pain in his ankle, followed by the ache of his knee. They topple off of him, but he's not eager to stand. He sucks in a sharp breath and reaches to touch his knee, flinching upon impact. If it wasn't a blown ACL, it was definitely dislocated. He could see that much.

"Jesus Christ, man– the fucking Brady Rule? Ever heard of it?" Cameron spits at the offensive tackler. The first person to take him down. The guy grimaced at the sight of a misshapen joint.

"Shit, dude– meant to take you down, but not that hard–"

"You fucking kidding me?" Cameron scoffs, wincing as he tries to draw his knee toward him. "Fuck-"

“Hey, hey, you good?” Rowan jogs over. Cameron works on pulling his helmet off, spitting out his mouthguard.

“I’m out,” Cameron heaves for breath. “I’m done.”

“Alright, hey, let me get you up-” Rowan held a hand out. Cameron hooks his palm around his friends and groans as he gets to his feet. He tries to take a step on his own, but his knee is not a fan, and upon his foot’s impact with the ground, his leg starts to buckle. Rowan winds an arm around him to catch his weight.

“Can you– don’t-” Cameron hisses. He had to have cracked a rib, too. “Ow, motherfucker-”

“Sorry,” Rowan says in a hushed tone. “C’mon. Let’s get you checked out.”

At the benches, his teammates were already talking shit– *princess had to get carried off the field? Hopping from one of the boys to the other? Is Ro into Cameron?* Cameron had to tune it out. One of the on-site medics knelt before him. Cameron pulls his pant leg up and over the padding, unstrapping it all to reveal a very clearly dislocated knee. The comments stop at that point, the team watching with a grimace. No one seems to notice the cheerleaders flooding the field.

“Fucking hell-” Cameron pants, white-knuckling the bench as the medic touched the joint, as if trying to figure it out. “You gonna put it in place or not? Christ-”

“Water, drink some water-” their coach said, offering his water bottle. Cameron waved him off, staring up at a cloudy sky and trying to catch his breath. His adrenaline is pumping, but it’s not helping his pain any.

“I can relocate the knee, but you might have blown some tendons. We should get you to an orthopedic-”

“Fucking– give me use of my fucking knee back, dammit,” Cameron spits.

In two swift motions and a painful crack, the medic slid the joint back in place. Cameron lets out a small yelp of pain, holding his breath. Eyes shut tightly, and hands still gripping the metal bench with ferocity, he wanted to cry.

He refused to cry.

Out of everything he could do right now, crying would be the worst. He can't give them another reason to rag on him.

"Thank you," he says hoarsely as the medic and his coach both layer ice packs on his leg and ankle alike. His vision is spotted. He is incredibly lightheaded. He holds a hand out for another ice pack, instantly pressing it to his forehead and doubling over. He might faint. He's going to faint. He leans into his legs for support, trying to slow his breathing.

He tries to gauge what else could be wrong. The brunt of the pain was gone, but his knee still ached. His ankle hurt like a bitch. His ribs too. Every breath was painful. His vision was spotted and overstimulating. Voices sounded forever away. It takes several minutes of ice on his forehead, neck, and wrists to shock his nervous system back to life.

A hand rests on his back, but he pulls away.

"Don't-" he sputters out. "Don't fucking touch me."

It didn't matter who it was. It could be Rowan, or a coach, or Greyson– hell, it could be the fucking Queen of England, and he wouldn't give a shit. He wanted to be left alone.

When the game resumes, he's not part of it. He could hardly stand, nevermind run the field anymore. Rowan assumed control, and Cameron was benched. He used the first play back on the field to make his escape.

He had to hobble through the locker room– he just changed into sweatpants and a hoodie– but when he changed his shoes, he realized just how swollen his ankle had become. Knee, too. He huffed, running a hand over his face.

Getting out to the car was harder. His limp became worse with every step, and he knew he would probably be driving himself to an ER to get checked out first and foremost. At least, that was the plan, until he arrived at his car and found Greyson leaning against it, arms folded, watching him.

"Leaving?" he asks.

"Yes," Cameron said, dumping his duffle bag in the backseat. "I'm out on injury until further notice, and I don't think I can stand another minute near those douchebags."

“Where are you planning on going?” Greyson asks next.

“I-I don’t know, Greyson,” Cameron says, exasperated. “I don’t know. I’m– I’m going to figure out how the hell I need to deal with this, and-and I’m probably going to call my Dad in case my scholarship gets revoked, and I’m going to try my best not to get hate crimed in the process. Happy?”

“Why are you taking this out on me?” Greyson interrupts, holding a hand out defensively. “I haven’t done anything to you. Why are you mad?”

“I’m not mad, Greyson-”

“You are! You’re-you’re fucking yelling in my face-”

“You want to see me mad?” Cameron asks, grabbing hold of his car for extra support. “I was mad when I realized I was gay, because I didn’t want to be a problem. And I was mad when you kept digging your way in no matter how much I didn’t want you here. And I’m mad that you keep getting put in the line of fire for my problems. And I’m really fucking mad that I’m surrounded by shitty people. And I’m going to be incredibly fucking angry if you don’t move, because this hurts like a bitch, and I want to sit down.”

“Just– dude, just come to mine and Rowan’s until things blow over, and we’ll-”

“It won’t blow over, Greyson! What don’t you get about that?!” Cameron exclaims, making his partner flinch. “I-I’m not you. I can’t slide through unnoticed. I’ve already dug my grave. I’ve had one foot in it since I joined the stupid fraternity, or-or took the scholarship, and since I surrounded myself with people I can’t trust.”

“You can trust me-”

“Please, move, Greyson,” Cameron says again. Greyson’s face fell. “Just… go away. Please. Save me any more trouble and go.”

Greyson looked up at his partner, but he saw none of him left. That expression isn’t one that belongs to Cameron. The anger, the resentment, the pain– it’s all so foreign. It’s all so… different. It terrified him.

“Call me when you get home. I want to know you’re safe,” Greyson spoke gently, arms folded over his chest. Cameron climbed into his

car, ignoring him. “Cameron…”

The car door slams, and Greyson winces again. He took a step back and let Cameron pull out of the parking lot. He didn’t even try to follow.

Chapter End Notes

So, long time no see...

It's amazing what happens when I have more than one day off a week... Between finishing Read Between the Lines, starting a new fic (go check it out !!) AND updating this for the first time in a little too long... i'm BACK babeyyyy.

I know i say it alot, but i'm hoping my schedule will start to open up soon. I graduate from university in May, and classes end at the end of this month, so I will have a little more time to myself and my hobbies I hope. I'll also be going to vidcon in June, so that's exciting!

Anywhoo.... hi. Sorry for the wait in updating, and thank you for sticking around
until next time...
hayl (hayloftown on twitter)

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Getting out of hand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cameron hates hospitals.

Not for any reason in particular– he thinks he got fairly lucky, living a fairly unproblematic and non-traumatic life. He was not much of a frequenter of the emergency room or urgent care. It had actually been a long time since he last ended up in one.

He waited in the waiting room chairs for what felt like hours. His phone was blowing up with texts from Rowan and Luca. Not Greyson, though.

Was he too harsh? Probably. But did he care?

Not yet, no. He was still in too much pain to care.

When someone did finally retrieve him from the waiting room, he sat in a different room for another hour, waiting. The pain at some point got so intense, sitting under the fluorescent lights, listening to the nearby alarms and busy-bodies, that he threw up into the nearest trash can. A nurse whisked in to clean out the trash bag and replace it with a blue barf-bag from the ER. She hovered closer to his doorway, just in case.

The room had no windows. He had no idea what time it was, or what was going on. His headache was getting the best of him, so he avoided using his phone too much. He was hooked up to monitors for his vitals, which felt a little unnecessary. He had a sprained ankle, not a heart attack. He laid in that bed, though, letting the nurse take his vitals and draw his blood just in case. His blood pressure was high, she noted. Heart rate too. It's common in injuries, she insists. He just buried his head into the pillow and tried to relax.

They do intake information, which takes all of five minutes. No history of health issues, no previous surgeries other than his wisdom teeth as a kid, not on any medications. He's complaining of knee and

ankle pain, having dislocated the knee. She orders an X-ray and a CAT scan, which sounds incredibly unnecessary, but he does what they ask.

More waiting.

He thinks about calling home while he waits– break the news to his Dad before he hears it through the televised game. Judging by his notifications from his mother, though, it was too late for that. He decides to give it a little time before he makes that call. He at least needs to know how bad it is.

He tries to nap, too, but when the nurse catches him trying to sleep, she insists he stays awake– protocol when they are looking for a concussion. Again, it felt unnecessary, but he does as told.

Four hours and two scans later, Cameron sat with a neurologist looking over the results.

“That’s one intense concussion. I would hate to see inside the head of whoever took you down,” the doctor jokes. Cameron just nods, rubbing his eyes. “It’s a Grade 2 post-traumatic concussion. You’ll probably experience plenty of headaches over the next few weeks. Maybe some nausea or vomiting. Sensitivity to light and sound. We suggest that you have someone be with you over the next 24 hours, just to be sure your condition doesn’t worsen.”

Cameron already burned all his bridges. He doesn’t have anyone who will be watching him for the next day. Nor did he care, in all honesty…

“The next 10-14 days should be about resting your brain. Not only from football, but all that other stuff too. Put your phone away, no video games, do your school work by pen and paper… give yourself the time off. Your brain will thank you. You can drive, but if you feel apprehensive whatsoever about doing so, find someone else to drive you. Concussions are no joke.”

“Mhm…” Cameron pinches the bridge of his nose. “Can I go now?”

“An orthopedic will be in shortly to discuss your other injuries, but otherwise… yes. Do me a favor, take it easy, read through these pamphlets, and if you have any issues… reach out.”

What kind of issues are we talking about?

Cameron nods and sits back, using the pamphlets and papers to block the light from his eyes. It feels like forever waiting for one last doctor to come in, but when he does, time flies.

It's exactly what he thought– sprained ankle and knee, and three broken ribs. They suggest crutches, but Cameron knew there wasn't a chance in hell he would risk hobbling around on crutches in an already unsafe house. Talk about being a walking victim…

The doctor helps teach him how to wrap the joints properly to help with the pain. Cameron watches with a blank stare, already dreading the phone call he's about to make. The doctor also talks about prescribing a brace for his knee to prevent another dislocation, as well as potentially having him pick up a generic one from the store for his ankle. It all felt like a nightmare.

When the doctors were out of his face and he was alone in the room, waiting for discharge paperwork, he finally made the phone call. He knew before he even hit her contact that he would get an instant migraine when she answered the phone.

"Cameron? Oh, baby, I've been calling you nonstop for the past several hours. Your father says there was an incident on the field— I-I watched it, baby. It looks bad. Is it bad?"

"Hi Mom," Cameron murmurs, running a hand over his face. "It's okay. I'm fine. I don't want you to worry…"

"Is it him?" Dad's voice comes from the background. "Lemme speak with him. Cameron?" Dad's voice takes over the line, and Mom's recedes to the background.

"Hi Dad…" he pinches the bridge of his nose. All he can think about is how he left Florida on such terrible terms.

"Where are you? Are you hurt?"

It's like the fight never even happened. Cameron blinks back tears, recalling all that's gone on recently. He's nauseous, and tired, and homesick, and in so much pain.

"Yeah," Cameron sniffles. "Yeah… I got hurt. I'm in the ER. Waiting on discharge papers, though…" he couldn't help it. A tear slips. He wipes it just as fast.

"How bad?" Dad asks.

“It’s bad?” Mom gasps. “What happened to my boy? Colton- Colton let me-“

“How bad?” Dad asks again.

“I blew out my knee. I’m lucky I still have my ACL,” Cameron whispers. “Sprained my ankle pretty badly. Bad concussion. A couple broken ribs…”

“Jesus,” Dad sighs.

“What is wrong with my baby, Colton?!” Mom demands through tears. Dad relays the information back, making her cry harder. Dad put the phone on speaker so they could both hear him. “Oh, honey… honey I’m so sorry.”

Cameron takes a shaky breath and sniffles.

“I’m worried about my scholarship. And-and the medical bill I’m about to be hit with…” Cameron confesses. “I don’t want to ask for money, but if-“

“Don’t worry about it,” Dad insists. “I’ll cover the bill. You focus on taking a breather and getting better.”

“Dad…”

“Cameron,” Dad says back. “I mean it. I-I don’t care how we left off. I don’t care about any of that. You’re my son. You’re my boy. *My* Cam. We will get you through this.”

Just like that, Cameron was crying. Sobbing, even. He choked out a confession on how messy things are getting up north, about how his “friends” have a hit on him, and how he came home to total destruction, and how he snapped at Greyson this morning. It all pours out of him like the Niagara-Falls of venting, spewing out his hatred of the world, and his desperation to be normal, and his fear. God, he’s so scared. He says it all to his parents, because dammit, he needed some guidance. They didn’t have much. Just encouragement and love.

When the discharge papers come, Cameron ends his call with a promise to update them more often. And with that, he goes home.

Despite doctor's orders to sit in dark silent rooms for the next two weeks, Cameron was greeted oh so lovingly by his house being filled to the brim with people, music playing loud enough that he could

hear it from down the street, and rave-like lights flashing inside.

The only benefit to the party was that he was able to easily slip in silently and make his way up the stairs (albeit, slowly) collapsing into his bed with a groan. He didn't plan to get up any time soon.

When Cameron didn't call him that night, Greyson tried not to panic.

There's plenty he could panic about– his safety, for one. His mental wellness too. Even just concern over his injuries… Greyson was a mess.

He tasked Rowan and Luca with trying to reach out to him. He didn't want to cause any more issues or make Cameron feel any worse than he already did. Though, they didn't have much luck, either. Rowan ended up going to the party at Delta Phi to keep an eye out for him, but he ended up leaving early. No sight of him.

"I just… I can't help but wonder if something happened," Greyson murmured as he stared down at the cup of coffee that Luca brought him from the dining hall. He made it perfectly, but Greyson didn't have much of an appetite. "What if he… what if he got jumped? What if someone hurt him? Or-or if he's in a really dark place on his own-"

"Greyson," Rowan said gently. "I know you… I know you're close with him now, but he's my best friend. I promise, he's not as fragile as you think."

"After everything today? I don't know, Ro… I… I just…" Greyson sniffles. "You didn't see him in the parking lot today. He was a shell of himself."

"Because he's pissed off," Rowan sighs. "But… he's a dude. He's a frat boy. He gets angry, punches a couple holes in the wall, and gets over it. Give him a little time to blow off some steam, and he'll come back around. He doesn't need a mother right now. He needs space."

Greyson didn't like that. Maybe he was mothering his partner too much, but it's because he cares. And right now, it doesn't seem like Cameron has enough of that. Someone has to give a shit about him, and Greyson will move heaven and Earth to make sure Cameron knows it.

His words keep ringing in Greyson's ears, though. Spat in his face. *Go away.* Like Greyson was a pest. Like he was a toy that broke. Tossing

him in the other direction, casting him aside, and off onto his own thing. Greyson knew what that was like– being something only useful when it was appealing to someone. It's how he spent the majority of his time with his brother. He didn't want to fall into that trap with his partner, too. He thought they were happy. He thought they were finally somewhere… good.

When Luca returns to his dorm that night, and Rowan turns over to sleep, Greyson is left restless, wondering, hoping, wishing that everything is okay.

Of course, it's not.

Greyson doesn't see Cameron at breakfast the next morning. He saw Bryce, though. Bryce was watching him from across the dining hall. Greyson packed up his food in a to-go-box and left. He didn't want to risk getting his ass kicked. On his walk back to the dorms, he noticed a flashy BMW following him, too. He ducked inside and to his room as swiftly as possible, locking the door behind him. He set his food down on his desk and tried to take a breath. There's a sudden crack from the far wall— an egg splattering against his window. Greyson flinched.

It's getting out of hand.

Greyson tried calling Cameron again. Straight to voicemail.

"Hey," Greyson pinches the bridge of his nose. "Do me a favor and call me back. I could use some help right now…"

Spoiler alert— Cameron never called.

Days passed. Greyson stayed in his dorm for the most part. He was terrified of leaving without someone with him. Every time he walked anywhere on campus, he noticed the gray BMW tailing him. If it wasn't the BMW, it was a pick up truck. Greyson was starting to think he was becoming paranoid as the time passed. Whenever he turned up at the dining hall, Bryce or one of his goons was there. Cameron wasn't, though. Anytime he went anywhere, he managed to run into one of them. He seemed to find everyone he didn't want to see and couldn't get in touch with the one person he did want.

He couldn't sleep.

No matter what his friends told him. No matter who was around. If he did sleep, he was woken with nightmares throughout the night. It was hard to rest these days.

He went four days without hearing from Cameron.

Cameron spent four days in bed, feeling like he was dying.

It's been so long since he was injured like this. He felt like such garbage, too. He must've picked up a cold from the ER or something, because he was sleeping off a fever as well as his concussion, sprains, and broken ribs. His pain was overwhelming. He slept more than anything. Sam kept an eye on him, but that didn't save him from the damage.

The house was a tense quiet for those few days. Everything was off putting. The one time Cameron did attempt to get down the stairs, he was met with a dozen sets of eyes watching him closely, waiting for him to crack. He barely got back up the stairs before his joints gave out. All for a stupid glass of water.

But four days without reaching out, four days of silence, is a red flag to his closest friends. They didn't care how dangerous it would be for anyone involved. Rowan and Greyson marched up on the doorstep of the fraternity, ready to fight their way through to reach him. Rowan knocked on the door until someone answered.

"Can I help you?" One of the guys who answered asks. Rowan glares at him and pushes past.

"Move. Where is he?" Rowan walks in, striding past the guys in the living room.

"Dude-!"

"Where's Cameron?" Greyson asks again, glaring.

"…upstairs. He's been sulking off his injuries-"

Greyson didn't wait for another word. Upstairs. He knew that direction. Injuries. He hated that word. Greyson took the steps two at a time. Rowan managed to push past and get to Cameron's room first.

They open the door and find a silent bedroom. Sam was sitting in his bed with his headphones on. He glanced up, startled, at the sudden intrusion. He relaxed just as quickly at the familiar faces. He held a finger to his lips. Rowan nods, approaching Cameron's bed and slowly sinking onto the edge. Greyson takes a step in, but that's as close as he gets. Cameron's back is to them. He's under a few blankets, and a pillow tucked over his head. It's so dark in the room– the blinds pulled

shut, lights out, and an energy of angst and despair that Greyson hated associating with people he loved.

“Hey,” Rowan whispers, resting a hand on Cameron’s shoulder. The usually tough and strong man flinches. “It’s us… Are you okay?”

More silence. Greyson hates it.

“How bad is the pain?” Rowan asks next. Greyson inches closer. There’s a small sound from Cameron’s bed, too quiet for anyone else to hear. “Have you asked for anything? Have you taken Tylenol?”

Greyson glances up and meets Sam’s eyes. Greyson wanted to have faith that Sam would be safe. He wanted to believe in him. But part of him was so angry, so hostile in defense of Cameron, that he didn’t care. He’d burn the world and everyone in it to see his partner safe. How could Cameron have gone four days without someone stepping in?

“Did you see a doctor?” Greyson asks next. Another wince. Rowan held a hand out to Greyson, as if trying to tell him to hold off.

“How about water? You got water?” Rowan continues. More murmuring. “Okay. C’mon. Sit up. I got you.”

Sam stands and moves in, taking one of Cameron’s hands and helping pull him up. Cameron wraps an arm around his ribcage and groans, adjusting his posture slowly but surely.

“Has he seen a doctor?” Greyson asks again, less patiently.

“Yes,” Cameron exhales. “I-I spent the afternoon in the ER after the game.” Greyson felt sick to his stomach. Cameron’s voice is so low and groggy. He looked so hurt. “Couple sprains, broken ribs. Concussion. Otherwise fine.”

“Otherwise…” Greyson scoffs. “That's not fine, Cameron.”

“Hence the word otherwise,” he murmurs back. Greyson was so mad. So scared. “Why are you here? Please just go home.”

“Because it’s been almost a week since we heard from you,” Rowan says gently. “We were worried.”

“I’m alive. You can go now,” Cameron huffs, sniffling. “Can I go back to sleep?”

“Are you serious?” Greyson asks incredulously. “After-after the week we’ve had? Can you please just-“

“I didn’t realize we had guests over, Cameron,” one of the first boys says from behind Greyson. Pardon him— not one of the frat boys. The head frat boy. Bryce. “Who let you in?”

“Mind your business, Bryce,” Greyson mutters.

“You’re in my house. This is my business,” Bryce shot back. “No one wants you here. Get out.”

“No,” Greyson says with an eye roll. Bryce clearly wasn’t expecting that answer.

“Excuse me?”

“Greyson…” Cameron murmurs.

“No,” Greyson says again. “What more could you possibly do to us? You’ve already told everyone. You already have a target on our backs. You already spend every moment of your miserable life trying to make us terrified of you. No, Bryce. I’m not doing it anymore.”

Cameron had two thoughts in his head: that Greyson was brave, and that he was a total fucking idiot.

“You either leave on your own, or we make you leave,” Bryce says.

“ *We* ,” Greyson scoffs. He looks at Sam. “Are you going to force me out?”

Bryce seemingly wasn’t a fan of this attitude anymore, because he grabs Greyson by the arm and tugs. Greyson tries to wrestle himself out of the hold. Rowan stood quickly.

“Get the fuck off of me!” Greyson spits, hitting Bryce’s chest. Bryce got rougher, using all of his strength to toss Greyson by the arm, sending him to the floor in the hallway.

“Hey!” Cameron shot up too.

“Bryce-“ Rowan goes to step in. He was two steps too late as Bryce delivers a hard kick to Greyson’s torso. Then a second to his head. Greyson tries to scramble back, and Rowan pulls on Bryce’s arm. Bryce shoulders Rowan off and goes for a third kick.

Cameron sees red.

Maybe getting into a fist fight with two sprained joints, broken ribs, and a concussion isn't his smartest idea. Maybe he should've let Rowan handle it instead, but the second he saw Bryce's hands on his partner, it was over. Cameron pushed himself through the crowd of people in his room— through Rowan and Sam, and past Greyson's body in the hall, and he swung. One hard punch straight to the jaw.

"Wanna fucking hurt someone? Hit me," Cameron spits. "I'm the one you're mad at. Hit me, douchebag. Hit me."

Bryce didn't need to be told again— the brawl broke out. Bryce pushed Cameron through a wall, and almost down the stairs. Sam manages to block the stairway from them, but that's about it. Bryce wrestled Cameron to the floor, throwing punch after punch. Rowan tried to pull him off. One of the housemates too. Cameron didn't need help though. He wriggled and fought until Bryce was pinned below him, blood gushing from his nose and mouth, Cameron's knuckles bloodied, and Rowan heaving him off by the arms. Cameron falls back against Rowan's legs, sat on the floor, coughing. Greyson scrambles back to his feet, and Sam tries to pull him away as a last act of protection.

"You don't get to fucking touch him," Cameron pants out, swiping the blood from his own face. "You hear me?! You stay away from him."

"Cameron," Greyson says, breathless.

"I'm done, Grey," Cameron heaves. "I'm done. I'm done bitching. I'm done hiding. I'm done."

"Okay," Greyson says, looking over his shoulder, and down the stairs to the onlookers. Bryce was still on the floor, coughing, sputtering. Greyson had never seen such brute force from his sweet and gentle boyfriend. Never seen such anger. It terrified him. "Consider it done, then. No more."

Sam releases Greyson to help mop up Cameron. Rowan was already knelt beside him. No one was coming to help Bryce. Greyson slowly sinks down in front of his partner, swiping a hand through his sweaty hair. Cameron winced.

"I'm-I'm sick. You don't want to-"

"I'll take a cold if it means you stop pushing me away," Greyson

whispers. There's a beat of silence between the two. "C'mon. Can you stand?"

"Maybe?" Cameron sniffles, looking at his already sprained ankle and knee. "Probably not."

"Okay… alright. Sam? Ro? Let's get him up?"

Greyson himself is limping and overwhelmed by pain as he gets back to his feet, but he pushes it aside to get Cameron going again. They get him into the bathroom, where he sits on the edge of the tub while Greyson gets a washcloth with soapy water. Cameron hung his head in his hands and took slow breaths. They were left alone. Perhaps to clean up the blood from the hallway. Maybe to clean up Bryce. Greyson didn't care.

"You're an idiot, you know," Cameron whispers. "Arguing with him."

"I don't care," Greyson murmurs, sopping the blood from Cameron's knuckles. "I wasn't going to leave you."

"You should've. You're just making it harder to-"

"Stop?" Greyson requests. Cameron's shoulders fall. "Please? I'm… I'm done fighting with you. I'm done having you angry at me." Greyson just keeps thinking of how Cameron looked, his face screwed up into a fit of rage, his fists hammering at their mutual enemy, his once friend. He won't lie. Cameron's rage was horrifying.

"What now?" Cameron asks finally, swallowing the lump in his throat. "If I don't get suspended for the fight, I'm definitely gonna be blacklisted in my own house. Lord knows if they let me go back to football, or-or if I can keep my scholarships…"

"We'll figure it out."

"We…" Cameron scoffs, sniffling. He grimaces when he remembers his bloody nose. Greyson grabs another cloth for him to use for his nose. "What are you gonna do?"

Greyson sets down the cloth and sits back on his knees. Cameron can't look him in the eye. Greyson runs a hand through his hair, aghast, and tired, and hurt. God, he was hurting.

"You wanna go solo? Fine. Good luck," Greyson sniffles. "You'll take a fucking beating for me, but you're still too scared to be seen with me.

I'm starting to think your problem is with me, and not this whole sexuality crisis you have going on…"

"Greyson…" Cameron coughs, grimacing. "Stop…"

"No, Cameron, you stop. I'm fucking tired of this. Do you have any idea how fucking stressful it is to love you? Do you realize how ridiculously scary and difficult you make it to stick around? I'm done with this. I'm done-"

"Greyson..."

"I'm tired, Cameron. I'm tired of getting my ass kicked, and being hunted down by your stupid homophobe friends because you can't figure out how to fucking handle it. I-I can't keep staying up worrying about you, or-"

"Greyson," Cameron said again, grabbing his wrist and pulling him forward. Greyson said earlier he'd take the cold if he had to. Cameron's about to put that to the test.

He pulls Greyson forward and plants a kiss to his mouth, and Greyson loosens his posture. A hand on Cameron's face, and the other on his leg, Greyson wanted to cry. He wanted to break down, and wrap Cameron in a tight embrace, and never go anywhere. He never wanted to leave this spot.

"You're so fucking confusing," Greyson whispers.

"I know…" Cameron blinks a few times. His head was killing him. "But I had to shut you up somehow."

"It worked," Greyson exhales, leaning in and kissing him again. Cameron grazes a touch over Greyson's ribcage, but his partner sucked in a sharp breath and winced away. Cameron immediately apologizes.

"Let me see how bad it is-"

"It's fine," Greyson insists. "You're my main concern. Let's get this blood off you."

Cameron tolerates Greyson's mothering for a while, entertaining him as he turns on the showerhead to run cold water over Cameron's bloody and bruised ailments. He won't lie— it felt good on his joints, like ice putting out the fire.

Greyson finds bruises under all that blood. A splotch covers his face where he got punched in the nose, and another one where he got hit with a left hook to the jaw. His lip is split, so he holds a folded up square of toilet paper to the cut until it stops bleeding. Same with his nose.

As for his already damaged joints, Greyson got a fresh roll of bandages so Cameron could rewrap them, making a soft murmur of where the brace is for his knee.

“On my… my desk chair,” Cameron breathes heavily, running a hand over his chest. “Under a jacket and a towel.”

“You really need to clean your room,” Greyson huffs, but nods and leaves the bathroom to retrieve it.

Sam is standing in the hall, directly across from the bathroom door. Rowan sat on the floor beside the door, waiting impatiently. Greyson stops short, looking between the two, and whispering an apology as he slipped past and into Sam and Cameron’s room.

Greyson digs under the laundry on Cameron’s desk chair— much more than just a jacket and towel— and finds a clunky looking brace that seems incredibly uncomfortable. There’s an ankle one on his desk, too. He grabs both and goes back toward the bathroom, finding all three boys in there together, arguing.

“I swear you’re trying to get yourself killed, Cameron!” Rowan exclaims. “I-I don’t know what to do when you keep throwing yourself in front of a bullet!”

“So you think I should just sit back and watch Greyson get beat up?” Cameron asks. “Would you do that if it was Luca?”

“Shut up, man...”

“Oh, so I’ve been violently outed, and all of a sudden you can’t be seen with Luca? We know, Ro. We all see it. You were more obvious than we were.”

“You picking fights is nothing like me trying to protect myself from one-“

“No one picked a fight except for Bryce,” Greyson steps in. All eyes go to him. “Cameron was defending me. It was stupid, and I didn’t need him to, but he wasn’t starting anything. If anyone should understand

this, it should be you. You're supposed to be on our side, Rowan."

"I am on your side," Rowan hisses. "I'm just tired of mopping your bodies off the floor."

"Well, it's done now. We're done," Cameron mutters, pulling the padding from his lip and nose to see if it was still bleeding. Instantly, both began to pool all over again. Greyson steps in, kneeling beside him and getting fresh tissue to hold. "If I'm not already removed from the school, then I'm leaving the fraternity. I'm done playing into bullshit like this."

"You're not leaving the frat, Cameron," Sam sighs.

"Well, I would really appreciate sleeping in a bed that didn't have bugs crawling around as some cruel prank, or-or eating breakfast at a table where no one calls me a slur. I'm fucking done with this, Sam. I'm done."

"So am I!" Sam exclaims. "I'm—I'm tired of picking up the mess that these fuckers leave for you. I'm tired of the weird superiority complex. But we're not leaving, and you're not getting kicked out. We'll figure it out, okay?"

"Easy to say when you're not the one with a hit on you."

Sam rolls his eyes and walks away. Rowan leans against the counter and watches Cameron secure the two braces to his leg and ankle before trying to stand. Greyson's hands hover in case he needed help, but he clearly didn't want any.

"You're not sleeping here tonight," Rowan says. "Santiago still isn't back in town. I'll stay in Luca's dorm. You two… just, keep it clean and we'll be fine."

"Ro."

"You think you can get out of the house without getting punched in the face? Or do you need an escort?"

With a huff, Rowan walks out, and he waits for them at the top of the stairs. Sarcastic or not, Rowan wouldn't leave the two most defenseless and targeted people in the world alone right now in this house.

Rowan drove them in Cameron's car to the dorms. No chance in hell

Cameron was walking that far, and he definitely wasn't in any condition to drive. When they arrive, Cameron needs a few minutes to close his eyes and rest his head against the dashboard before they get up. Rowan asked if they would be okay on their own before parting ways. Clearly they needed a moment. Greyson sat on the middle console and ran a hand gently over Cameron's back, waiting for the right moment to move. Cameron took slow breaths and curled into Greyson's soft touch for comfort. He only took about five minutes to be ready to stand and move inside. They take the elevator to Greyson's floor. Cameron held his hand in the hall, and he didn't care who looked. He didn't care about any of it anymore.

You make it so difficult to love you , Greyson said earlier. It kept playing in Cameron's head on repeat. Love love love.

Greyson opens the door and lets them in. Cameron sinks down at Greyson's desk before kicking off his shoes and tossing them toward the doorway. Cameron smiles sadly as Greyson hands him a box of tissues. A small thank you, and grabbing a few, he wipes at his less bloody, now runny nose.

"I'm going to get you sick."

"I'll take a cold from you," Greyson sighs. "I'm already this deep in, aren't I?"

Cameron nods and looks away. Greyson shuffles to his bed and bends down to grab something off the floor. Cameron glances at him and catches the screwed up face of pain and the way Greyson holds his side as he slowly stands again.

"Hey," Cameron breathes. "C'mere."

Greyson frowns but complies, coming to stand in front of Cameron. He expected a hug, maybe for him to reach out for Greyson's hands, or touch his hips. He does none of that. He plays with the hem of Greyson's shirt.

"Take it off."

"Hm?" Greyson raises an eyebrow. "I said I'm okay with getting sick, but I don't think either one of us is in the mood for-"

"Just do it. For me?" Cameron raises his eyebrows, pleading.

Greyson sighs and does as asked, slipping his arms out of his jacket,

turning to hang it, followed by his shirt which he tosses in the hamper. Before he even turns around, Cameron sees the black, purple, and blue coating a good portion of his back along his side. Cameron grimaces, standing and pacing closer. Greyson looks over his shoulder, and his face falls.

“You weren’t looking for sex,” he realizes. “I’m fine.”

“Sit down,” Cameron murmurs, pulling him toward the bed.

“Cameron, Really, I am okay,” Greyson says as Cameron presses his hips back against the mattress. Greyson sits back on his palms and sighs, knowing there was no way out of this. Cameron’s eyes inspect the damage. His fingers trace Greyson’s ribcage, earning a sharp inhale. He looks to the ceiling to avoid seeing Cameron’s loving, yet fearful look.

“You bruised some ribs at the very least,” Cameron murmurs. “You should get an X-ray.”

“You’re one to talk,” Greyson says, face still turned to the ceiling. He closes his eyes and takes a breath. “At least we’ll be matching our cracked ribs. How bad are yours?”

“Bad,” he confesses. Greyson nods. “Probably gonna sit out for the last game. But… there’s always next season.”

Greyson opens his eyes again and looks to his partner. Everything is tumbling around them. The world is collapsing, and they are being buried alive under the rubble. At least they have each other.

Cameron places his hands on either side of Greyson’s hips on the bed, leaning against it for support. Their foreheads touch together, sharing a breath.

Finally, after everything, Cameron breaks.

It starts with just silent tears. Greyson opened his eyes to see them trickle down tragically, and Cameron sniffles. Then, the shaky breath, shaky hands, sinking down onto the bed with Greyson. Hurting more than he could explain. Hurting in every way. Greyson wraps his arm around him, and Cameron lets the sob spill from his mouth and into Greyson’s shoulder.

“I got you,” Greyson whispers. “It’s okay…”

“I’m sorry,” he cried. “I’m sorry-“

“It’s okay, Greyson says again, feeling his chest split open with every helpless cry from his partner. “I know, Cameron…”

“I tried so hard,” he sobbed. Greyson lets his own tears escape. He can’t help it. “I tried so, so hard, Grey. I tried to keep it together. I tried to keep us safe, and-and to fix things, and I just keep- I keep fucking things up in-in every place I go…”

“That’s not true,” Greyson murmurs. Cameron sobs harder, shoulders shaking, burying his face, tugging his hair. It hurts to watch. “You’re not fucking anything up-“

“Shut up, I am,” he picks up his head to reveal the worst possible expression Greyson could fathom on Cameron’s face. Pink cheeks, bloodshot eyes, runny nose, wet skin, panicking. Burning through them both. “I am. I-I fought with my Dad, and-and I’m not safe at the frat, and my own team hates me, and I fucking outted myself like an idiot and I-I’m in a lot of fucking pain-“ His voice breaks as he looks down at his banged up knuckles, easily the least of his worries. He’s hiccuping, crying, sniffling, trying to be better and failing miserably. His jaw chatters, and he takes a sharp breath, followed by a little pained *ow* , holding his ribs.

“Come here. Breathe,” Greyson shushed, pulling Cameron back. The two crowd together into an embrace, and Greyson held on tight, refusing to let go. Refusing to let him be alone.

The pressure on his sternum and ribs ached. Greyson wanted to be alone, to sulk himself, to figure out what the hell came next. But none of that shit mattered. Not his brain working in overdrive. Not his pain. Not even Cameron’s stupid cold that triggered a part in the back of Greyson’s brain. He makes all those thoughts shut up in exchange for holding his partner, in exchange for giving Cameron a sense of comfort in all his terror.

For a while, they sat like that. Cameron’s head in Greyson’s shoulder, crying. Greyson would trace his back and neck, would kiss the top of his head and murmur sweet nothings until he settled. And when possible, Cameron bowed his head against Greyson’s chest to take steady breaths. Cameron held Greyson’s cold hands to the back of his own neck, which was hot with the mixture of overstimulation and a fever. He took slow breaths and tried to ground himself.

When things calmed down, Cameron let Greyson get up to put on

something comfortable— an oversized shirt and sweats, and crawl back into bed. Cameron settled back in right away. Cameron was the first to fall asleep, crashing within minutes of laying his head down.

This was far too much. Greyson was over it– all of it. He just wanted to be back at peace.

Chapter End Notes

So.

Ouch.

I know it's been a hot minute since I updated. As always, a lil apology from me, sorry folks. In better news though; I finished school! Im graduating with my Bachelors in English with a focus in Creative Writing in EIGHTEEN DAYS!!! WOOOOOOO!!! I'm over the moon to be done, even if I will eventually be going back for a masters.... Not now, though.

Anywhoo. I hope you're all swell. I wanted to have this out yesterday but my kiddos at my school decided to wake up from nap an hour early and I didn't have a chance to finish editting. I hope this suffices. i know its not my best work, but its work lol

Happy Tuesday ?? I guess ??
Until next time...
Hayl (hayloftown on twitter!!)

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

All said and done

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson woke first the next morning to Cameron curled against the wall, blanket pulled over his head, and sound asleep. Slowly, carefully, Greyson slipped out of bed and wrote a note to his partner on the off chance that he woke up and headed out. He needed coffee to get through this headache, and he figured Cameron would probably appreciate him coming back with breakfast too.

But first, he had to run an errand.

He knocked on Luca's door, folding his arms around himself. It takes a few moments, but eventually a wide-eyed Rowan opens the door with messy hair and fixing his shirt. Greyson raises an eyebrow.

"Hi," Rowan says, out of breath. "What?"

"Come file a police report with me."

"What?" Rowan blinks a few times.

"You're a witness. You saw what happened yesterday. You saw how the past few years have been for us. Come with me," Greyson demands. Rowan runs a hand over his face, looking behind him. "You can hook up later. C'mon. I wanna get it over with before Cameron wakes up."

"Okay," he says, breathless. "Alright. I'm-I'm coming. I'll meet you at the car."

Rowan scrambled out the door after him within seconds, calling an apology to Luca on his way out. Once in the car, Rowan glanced at his best friend with a softened, concerned gaze.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm pissed. Drive," Greyson demands.

Rowan doesn't need to be told twice.

His nerves get the better of him. Greyson is nauseous thinking about it. He's terrified. But when they pull up to the campus police, Rowan is still right there like his own personal bodyguard, walking in with him. The words are stuck in Greyson's throat. He's never been one to hesitate, but… he's scared. Fine. He'll admit it. He's scared of those stupid fucking losers.

"We'd like to file a report," Rowan says, not taking his eyes off Greyson. "Please."

"…sure thing," the woman at the desk says. "Take these forms and an officer will call you back shortly."

It was not Greyson's favorite thing he's ever done. If anything, it was kind of mortifying to spill every detail of his life to this stranger cop when he already hates campus police. For the most part, they're known for giving absurd parking tickets and making snide comments. But the officer keeps writing every note, and Rowan is asked to step out so she can see some of the bruises on Greyson. Someone talks to Rowan too about the things he's witnessed. They collect all the information they can and they're released in an hour. The nerves don't wear off, but Greyson didn't care. It would be better to say it than to live in fear.

When it was all said and done, though, Rowan and Greyson sat in the car in the dorm parking lot in silence, letting the sunlight pour through the windshield, and the brisk air nipped at their skin. Greyson lets his eyes rest shut and takes slow breaths.

"What if they get arrested?"

"They deserve it…" Rowan says back. "After everything they put you guys through."

"What if they get by with a slap on the wrist?" Greyson asks next. His best friend is quiet. "What if I just did that, and it started a huge problem?"

"Buddy… It can't be worse than it already is," Rowan exhales. "Let the university handle it. Try not to stress."

Stress is all he does, though…

They part ways for Greyson to go back to their room, and Rowan back

to Luca's. When Greyson opens the door, he finds Cameron sat in Greyson's chair, staring out the window with his arms drawn tight around himself. He looks up and relaxes as Greyson comes in.

"I brought you food," Greyson says gently, letting the door click shut behind him. Cameron nods and closes his eyes. Greyson sets the bag of food and the tray of drinks down on the desk, running a hand over Cameron's hair and kissing his hot forehead. "You're really warm." He nods again, leaning into Greyson's torso as he held on to him.

"Whatcha get?" He mumbles.

"Just a muffin and a tea," Greyson pulls back and looks over his face. "Baby…" Cameron's eyes flutter open and he looks up at Greyson with a very pitiful look. "Let's get you some Tylenol… and maybe some cold medicine."

Cameron shrunk in the seat as Greyson dug through his little first-aid kit Cameron would've once made fun of him for, but has come in handy more times than he'd like to admit. It's like his own personal Walgreens. Absent-mindedly, he kneads at the muscles around his knee and sips some tea. Greyson pops a few Tylenol and some generic cold medicine into Cameron's hand and offers him some water, then offers him an ice pack. Greyson half expected him to tend to his knee, which seemed to be bothering him. Instead, he rests it against his face and sighs.

"Did you take your temperature?"

"I don't want to freak you out," Cameron murmurs.

"I am staying calm so far…" Greyson says back, frowning. "C'mon. Come back to bed."

Under any other circumstances, food near his bed was a firm *no* . Similarly, being near anyone with so much as a sniffle was his own personal nightmare. But today, but with Cameron… he'd do anything to stay at his side. He'd endure all the fear, all the pain, if it meant keeping him safe and cared for.

"You wanna tell me about your fight with your dad?" Greyson asks quietly, Cameron's head resting on his chest and drawing lazy shapes on the back of Greyson's hand. Cameron shrugs.

"Same shit as always," he whispers. "I'm always his star but never good enough. I'm always going to be the problem child who causes

too much of a mess."

"You and I both know that isn't true…" Greyson says. "He loves you."

"Sometimes."

"He does," Greyson insists. "Maybe he doesn't always do it the right way, but he does. He loves you, and he's worried about you."

"You could say that again…" Cameron sniffles. "Had him and my Mom panicking when they heard I was in the ER."

"Have you talked to them since?"

"No…" The guilt weighed on him just thinking about it. "I will. I just… I had a rough few days."

"It's alright," Greyson reassures. "You'll figure it out."

Cameron nestled in deeper and shut his eyes. Greyson looks at the barely touched muffin and frowns, kissing Cameron's head again.

It's a resting-day. Cameron doesn't budge much from his spot in Greyson's waist. Neither does Greyson. At one point, Rowan comes in to get some clothes and supplies to shower, walking in to find them both crashed asleep in a scrambled manner on Greyson's bed. It was rather sweet.

The following morning, they were back to it.

Cameron has to be at the field for practice, even injured. He kissed Greyson's head and left silently, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he returned to his car. He checked his phone for the first time in days. As always, it was notification galore. He sets it back down and sticks some sunglasses on his face so he could drive relatively pain free.

Cameron didn't have to participate in any physical exercise today, but he did get stuck with the physical therapist getting checked out on the sidelines.

"This knee is pretty unstable my man," the physical therapist states with a sad smile. "Have you considered swimming? It's a low impact exercise, and water usually does joint injuries a lot of good."

"Maybe," Cameron sighs, eyeing the field as the rest of his friends ran drills. "Part of me wants to just… let myself heal and take it easy for a few weeks, though. That's what the orthopedic at the ER said."

“I guess that would be fair…” he didn’t seem too happy with that idea, though. “You been wrapping it?”

“Wrapping, taping, the brace… all three, depending on what feels best…” Cameron glances up, squinting through the sunlight as his coach appears with another guy at his side. “‘Sup, coach?”

“I dunno, kid? What’s up?” Coach responds, the two finally blocking the sunlight, allowing Cameron to catch a true look at the company. A police officer. “They wanna talk with you.”

His stomach plummets.

“Did I do something sir?” Cameron asks nervously.

“Did you? I wanna hear it from your side,” the guy says, pulling out his notepad. “You’re Cameron Cunningham?”

“Yes, sir…” Cameron uses his hand to shield his eyes. The physical therapist backs away.

“We received a couple of reports about a fight on campus grounds two days ago involving you and a few other students. We’re just following up, seeing what everyone says, checking in to see who’s hurt.”

“I’m fine,” Cameron reassured. The officer eyes his knee, still in the clunky brace. “This… is a football injury. I… I took a bad hit a week ago. Concussion, couple sprains and busted ribs.”

“What about the bruises?” Coach asks suddenly. Cameron bit his cheek. “Those weren’t from the field.”

Both men are staring Cameron down, half expecting him to run, half expecting him to drop into a pile of mush. Cameron looks over his shoulder, then to the field where Rowan was slowing to a halt, eyeing them. The officer senses his concern, also looking around.

“What you say is confidential. For my records only,” the officer insists. “Is someone after you?”

“There was an incident. A-a few incidents, I guess…” his gut swirls, and he scratches the back of his neck. “I-I was resting after my injuries. A few friends dropped by the frat to check on me. One of them isn’t… well, some of the guys don’t like him. One started picking on him, and suddenly they were kicking him, and I just… I lunged in. I got carried away, but it-it was to keep him safe, y’know? I-I didn’t

mean to-“

“Hey,” the officer holds a hand out. “It’s alright. Just, tell me the story as it was. Who was hurt and how badly?”

“I walked away with a few bruises, split lip and bloody nose, otherwise unscathed,” Cameron mumbles. “Greyson… he never saw a doctor, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he had some busted ribs too, and he has a shit ton of bruises.”

“The other guy? The attacker? What was his name?”

“Bryce,” Cameron murmurs. Coach closed his eyes and hung his head. “Bryce Preston. I… I definitely hit him hard. I don’t know how bad his injuries are. I was so focused on making sure Greyson was alright-“

“I get it,” the officer nods. “You said there were a few incidents. What led up to this?”

Suddenly, Cameron was spilling every detail of the past few months to the damned campus cop. He’s never been a fan of the police, and even less of a fan of campus police, but it’s all been brewing for so long, he was ready to boil over. He needed to get it out. He needed someone to know.

He tells the officer about what Liam did. He tells the officer about Aiden. He tells the officer about being stalked, and getting into fights, and seeing his partner get his ass kicked a dozen times over, and it all spills out of him like an overflowing river, spilling into the banks, uncertain of where to go. He’s scared, and he’s in pain, and all he can think about is what on Earth he could do to prevent himself from having to get too deep into this. He just wants it over. He just wants to go back to normal.

Well, not back to normal. If anything, he wants anything but that. He never wants to go back to being the guy who silently tags along, meekly following the crowd out of fear of what his friends would do. He never wants to be so lonely, and miserable, and quiet, ever again.

But he doesn’t want this, either.

He wants to go home to his fraternity that he spent atrocious amounts of money on. He wants to play his sport that he loves. He wants to spend more time with his friends and with his boyfriend. He wants to hang out with his boyfriend at parties and to invite him over for movie night at the frat and he wants to spend some time writing his

stupid songs on the piano.

He wants something he's never had before, something impossible to achieve.

When the officer leaves, Cameron is teary eyed, tired, and his medicine from the morning is wearing off. His cough is back, as well as a migraine and some rather intense pain throughout his injuries. His coach lets him leave early.

Cameron wasn't sure where to go— back to Greyson's, take up his bed yet another night? Or back to the fraternity, where his life is at risk?

He picks the worst of the two options.

He parks and walks up to the front door. It's eerily quiet when he opens it. Uncomfortably so when he wades deeper. He reaches the kitchen before he finds anyone.

"Where is everyone?" Cameron asks softly. One of his friends (are they friends?) glanced up from his phone and shrugged.

"Practice. Sleeping. Out. I dunno. A lot of them cleared out when the cops showed up. I think they were afraid to have their weed stash found."

"Cops?" Cameron parrots.

"Yeah. Looking for Bryce. They took him to the campus station. Turns out Sam was not pleased with some of the shit he's been pulling. Reported his ass."

"Sam?" He repeats again. The friend scoffs.

"Where have you been man? You get hit that hard?" His friend stands from the kitchen table, dumping his bowl in the sink. "For the record, most of us don't give a shit who you're fucking. Long as I'm not the one who has to suck your dick, we're good."

With that, he walked out of the room, and Cameron was alone. Confused, relieved, and still a little bit scared.

Chapter End Notes

WOOO ANOTHER CHAPTER !!!!

lil life update: good things coming irl :) graduating in ONE WEEK

from university, started a full time job this week, just celebrated my birthday on Monday, and about to finish a novel. looking forward to the beautiful things in life.

Until next time,
Hayl <3

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

You're free.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cameron remembers the days in childhood when he was vehemently against the police, including and especially their watered-down campus versions on school property. He recalls the years of talking back, bitching, and muttering under his breath every time one of them was standing over him for one bullshit reason or another. In all honesty, he still hates them. Just because you can hand out parking tickets and have a badge doesn't make you a superior being. That being said… the taste of justice was sweet.

It hit the news quicker than Cameron anticipated. Things settled even faster, too.

Cameron woke up one morning in his bed at the frat, feeling another day of fear, another expectation of uncertainty and danger. Instead, he rolled over and had a newspaper thrown at his head. He flinched, sitting upright abruptly.

"Congrats," Sam says, plopping down at his desk chair. He was all smiles. "You're free."

Cameron rubbed the sleep from his eyes and squinted at the paper. It's the *Providence Journal* . Headline? ***Brown Expels and Sues Three Former Football Athletes*** . Cameron sat up further and instantly flips to the directed page, reading the blurb. He skims past most of it, mostly just looking for primary details.

Christina Paxson, President of the Ivy League University, commented the following:

"It is with great sadness that I say we missed the warning signs of what these young men would be. Brown University stands to be a face of inclusion and opportunity for all students. We will be sure that the three face proper consequences. These three are aware that they are not welcome on campus any longer."

Aiden Leech, 23, Bryce Preston, 22, and Liam Hindman, 20, were all allegedly involved in numerous physical assaults against multiple students on the campus grounds, having been reported by several key witnesses as well as victims. We were declined comment from campus police and any potential witnesses at this time, and the identities of the victims remain anonymous. Rhode Island State Police have not decided to press charges, but there is a no trespass order in place.

Cameron's shoulders relax, and he runs his hands over his face.

"Oh my God," Cameron whispers shakily.

"This is good, man," Sam says. "This is a good thing. It's going to help you. Help a lot of people, really…"

"Did you do it?" Cameron murmurs, looking up. Sam raises an eyebrow. "Turn them in? Report it?"

"Why?" Sam sits back. "Would you be upset if I did?"

"…I don't know?" Cameron exhales. "Not really. Just…"

His head is in a storm. Revenge feels good, but the news… that's scary.

"Well…" Sam bites his cheek. "I said something. Regardless of if you wanted me to or not. I went to someone who told me to tell campus police. By the time I was there, they apparently had already started an investigation and was about to go looking for me anyway." Cameron nods slowly. "I didn't start it. But I kept the ball rolling. If this is a bowling metaphor, consider this a strike, because this is the best win we're gonna get."

We . Cameron notices how he keeps saying we. Like he was part of this. It didn't feel right.

"Okay," Cameron says instead. "Alright. This… this is good."

He'll have to keep telling himself that until he believes it.

He goes down the stairs to eat, finding a lot of the others also celebrating the morning news. A clipping of the photo of the three at the campus police station is pinned to the dartboard with a handful of darts on Liam's face. A couple of the guys pat Cameron on the back with a smile. Someone announces that they all deserve a drink after all was said and done as a celebration of being done with the three

nuisances. Cameron silently nods and just carries on.

Halfway through breakfast, there's a knock on the door. Cameron goes rigid. This is what he's afraid of. People are coming knocking. People scratching at the walls for answers. Someone in his face demanding personal stories about people who used to be his friend. He used to be friends with them. It's nauseating.

Someone opens the door.

"Cameron! Lover boy is here!" He calls over his shoulder.

Cameron isn't sure if that was better or worse.

"He's here?" Greyson's voice carries so beautifully down the foyer and to the dining table. Cameron pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Finally decided to join the party? We're celebrating. Are you down to drink with us or are you too much of a stiff?" Someone teases. Greyson shot them a glare. Same old frat boys. Same old Greyson.

Greyson finds Cameron at the table, surrounded by other frat boys, and shifts uncomfortably in his stance. Sam is the first to stand, muttering for them to give the two some privacy. The rest filter out after Sam, all presumably hiding in the living room where they can eavesdrop.

"Hey," Greyson murmurs, resting a hand on Cameron's back. "You feeling okay?" Cameron nods, but stays quiet. "Cam?"

"They used to be my friends," Cameron whispers, voice cracking. He can't make eye contact. Greyson's shoulders fell, and he slowly sank down into the chair beside his partner. "I-I used to respect them. I used to be buddies with them. Party together. Hang out. Pick out classes together…" He sniffles, and suddenly he realized he was crying. You know, like an idiot.

"They were shitty friends, Cameron," Greyson reminds.

"But they weren't," Cameron insists, finally looking at Greyson. His poor eyes, so sad, so desperate. Greyson rests a hand on Cameron's knee. "For the longest time, there was… no issues. No problems. For a while, I-I didn't even know they were assholes like that. I didn't hang out with them knowing they were homophobic, or-or vicious fucking people. I hung out with them because we would go to the bar together, and because we had inside jokes, and because they

seemed…”

“Nice?” Greyson assumes. It pains him to think of the worst people he knows as nice. People who are horrible to them. People who have done terrible things to others. People who deserve to be in prison, but instead are only facing a lawsuit and an expulsion.

“I hate being wrong,” Cameron whispers. “I’m a terrible judge of character.”

“A little bit,” Greyson nods. Cameron shot him a glare, wiping a fallen tear. “I mean, you liked them. You hated me. You couldn’t get much more wrong if you tried.”

“I only hated you because you were an asshole.”

“I still am,” Greyson rolls his eyes. “You just learned to like it.”

“What is with me and liking terrible people?”

“I’m going to allow that,” Greyson decides. “Because you’re upset, and I’m nice.”

“Barely.”

Cameron rests his head on Greyson’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry I’m not more happy about this. I-I know they were terrible to you.”

“They were terrible to both of us,” Greyson slowly winds his arms around Cameron’s frame, listening to his relaxing breaths. “I’m sorry.”

“You turned them in, didn’t you?” Cameron mumbles in his neck. The silence in response answered his question. Cameron blinked, letting more tears fall. “Thank you.”

Greyson held on tighter, afraid to let go. Afraid of what’s next.

Even in a house without Aiden, Bryce and Liam, the frat wasn’t the most comfortable place to stay. Eventually, to at least escape prying eyes and curious ears, they moved upstairs to Cameron’s bedroom—Sam mentioned leaving his side of the room alone, which made Cameron grimace.

“How’s the pain today?” Greyson asks once behind closed doors, watching his partner limp toward his bed and collapse into the

mattress. “Worth the trouble yet?”

“Fuck off.”

Greyson takes the moment to study his partner in closer proximity. He’s dressed in basketball shorts and a hoodie. The bruising on his knee joint was obvious today. Swelling, too. The bastard was wearing some taller Nike socks, so Greyson had no idea how his ankle was doing, but he didn’t presume much better.

“Have you been taking care of yourself?”

“It’s only been, like, two days since I last saw you,” Cameron mumbles into his pillow. “I’m fine.”

“Are you taping and wrapping your-“

“You’re mothering me,” Cameron cuts him off, sitting up again. Greyson goes quiet. “I-I know you care. I know it’s some-some deep rooted shit with you. It’s always deep rooted shit. But please, be my boyfriend, not my mother. I can hardly tolerate my own right now.”

Greyson’s shoulders drop, but he nods. Slowly, he sat on the bed beside his partner, running his fingers through the roots of Cameron’s hair, watching as the tension melted out of his body and into a puddle of mush.

“Your mum has been texting you?” Greyson assumes.

“Worse. Calling every hour. Making sure I’m not in a coma from a stupid concussion. I’m almost out of the two week mark, you’d think she’d lighten up.”

“She’s a mother, and she loves you,” Greyson says. “She will never lighten up.”

“You and her would be best friends.”

“Me and Cassandra? We *are* best friends,” Greyson scoffs, slowly sinking down so he was laying at Cameron’s side, still playing with his hair. “I got her number y’know.”

“Good. Text her to play iPhone games instead. She loves 8ball.”

Greyson snickers and kisses Cameron’s temple. Any lasting worry that was left in his partner dissipated. Finally, the fog began to clear. Finally, things began to feel normal. Two boys in bed together, loving

together, one another, and existing. Cameron closes his eyes and listens to the soft ruffle of Greyson's fingers in his hair, lips parting as he massaged his scalp with a perfect amount of pressure.

"I love you," Cameron breathes. Greyson breaks out in a beautiful smile. One that radiates joy. One that shows all the good in the world, none of the evils, none of the hardships. One that gives Cameron hope.

"You do?"

Cameron nods, carefully brushing his fingers over Greyson's jaw. He looks between Greyson's eyes with sweet, kind love. Sugary, tooth rotting love that aches to his core. He never realized he hadn't said it out loud before. He never realized it was never explicitly stated in those three words until Greyson looked at him like that. So excited. So happy. So relieved.

"I love you," Cameron confirms, kissing his mouth very gently, as a reminder, as a promise. "So much."

"I love you," Greyson says back, trembling, but still smiling. "I'm so sorry things suck."

"They suck a little less right now…"

And he meant it. Once close friends now terrible enemies, a rift between all his allies, a broken trust and injured body— none of it summed up to the all encompassing feeling that is love and care. Cameron has never felt so cared for. He has never felt so intentionally loved; loved in such detail and intensity. It's just perfect.

Chapter End Notes

REVENGE IS SWEET. FAREWELL TO THE TERRIBLE TRIO !!! YOU WILL NOT BE MISSED!!

anywho.

many of you may have saw on twitter, but this fic is ending relatively soon. i want to close up some loose ends, give you some fluff, give you something of optimism to show for the future. I'm not sure how many chapters are left. Could be one, could be five, i'm honestly not sure. But it will be worth it. Maybe even a mini-epilogue :)

Until next time folks.
Hayl (@/hayloftown on twitter!!)

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Might just do that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson recalls how his parents loved one another, and it was a beautiful travesty ending in nightmarish horror that is just as inevitable as every breath they took beforehand.

They knew Dad would die long ago. Maybe not as young as he did, maybe not so soon, but they knew it would happen earlier than most. They knew the rest of his life would be a slow decline, would be painful, medication-filled, and heavy with appointments.

And yet, every morning, his parents sat at the dining table, holding hands and eating together like teenagers in love. They would make coffee and chat about the future. They would cuddle on the couch, and wait to watch TV shows together, and they would go on dates at least once every couple of weeks. Greyson remembers seeing their love and how beautiful it all was, even in the midst of gore. He remembers how Mum kissed Dad's hands in the hospital before he died, and how she still wore his wedding bands around her neck. He remembers how Dad held her for as long as he physically could. He remembers how apologetic he looked for dying.

He thinks he's in love with Cameron in a similar way— dreading inevitability, whether it's death at the end of life, or a breakup at the end of a relationship, or growing apart at the end of college, yet still loving every moment he has.

In the mornings, they get breakfast together. Either Greyson will come to the frat, Cameron will come to the dorms, or they will meet somewhere in the middle. They ate together, made soft mention about the plans for the day, what they would do together later. If they didn't have time, they would still find a way to talk. They found their opportunities.

"I dunno, Mum," Greyson says, running a hand over his face as he shudders in the cold. "I think he's alright. He's back on the field. Every once in a while the knee bothers him, but otherwise he's okay…"

“Well, you keep an eye on it baby. Those boys never know how to take care of themselves. If it looks like it’s hurting him, you make him take a break.”

“Mum,” Greyson scoffs, smiling. “He’s a grown man. He’ll be okay without my instruction.”

“We’re caretakers, dear,” Mum says. “It’s in our blood. We see fragile people and we love them until they’re whole.”

“I’m pretty sure our session last week with Dr. Rowland said you had to stop pushing your personality traits onto me,” Greyson reminds.

Those stupid virtual sessions meant the world to him these days. It’s been more healing than any of his solo-sessions ever could be. Sometimes it’s him and Mum. Sometimes Wesley tags along too. Phoebe pokes in if she's particularly down one week. None of them go in alone, though. He’s never felt closer to his family.

“I’m not! Baby, you tell me with all honesty you didn’t look at this boy and think about how you could fix him,” Mum demands. Greyson looked out onto the field where his best friend and boyfriend were running, side-by-side, gleaming with sweat and joy. “Your silence says I’m right.”

“I hate when you are.”

“I know,” she chuckles. “I don’t think you are as intense as I am, dear. I think you know how to set healthier boundaries for yourself than I did. But I know that gentle soul of yours always yearns to take care of him…”

She could say that again.

The past few weeks have been a constant loop of doting over his partner. Making sure his head was okay, making sure his knee and ankle were healing well, eating meals with him, popping by the frat more often to check on him. Emotional and physically, Greyson has been his support. It’s been nice, though. It’s nice to be loved, but even nicer to love in return.

“When can I speak with him?” Mum asks next with a glimmer of hope in her tone.

“Mum!” Greyson groans, sinking into the bleachers. A whistle blew, and the boys on the field slow to a stop and go to their waterbottles.

“Shit, okay— gotta go. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“You better introduce me to him by then!”

Greyson hung up as Cameron strolls over, a small waddle to his step as he favors his knee. Greyson held out the waterbottle and watches Cameron try to stretch out his legs.

“Your Mom?” Cameron asks, swallowing his water. Greyson nods. “How is she?”

“She’s my mother,” Greyson snickers. “Telling me to make sure you’re healing well.”

“Tell her I’m just fine.”

“I did,” he lied. He’s a caretaker at heart, just like Mum said. And so is she. “You’re looking better out there. More comfortable.”

“I’m feeling better,” Cameron said. It sounded like the truth. “Happier. More at ease.”

“Good,” Greyson stands, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “So next season, you’ll have a killer senior year without any issues, Captain?”

“That’s the plan,” Cameron smirks, looping an arm around Greyson’s waist and pulling him in for a kiss. Their lips connect in gentle harmony, a whisper of love between them in the cold breeze. Greyson tasted this morning’s tea on his lips still, and smelled a day’s worth of sweat. His nose scrunched. “Don’t say it.”

“You stink.”

“You love when I shower though,” Cameron murmurs. Greyson rolls his eyes and kisses him again before pulling back.

“I love when you’re *clean* . There’s a difference.”

Cameron hooked a sweaty arm around his neck and ruffled his perfectly fluffy hair, just to annoy him. Greyson groans, but allows it, because he knew they would both be in the shower soon enough anyways. Preferably together.

Rowan is standing amongst a crowd of other players, grinning ear to ear. Greyson loves that these days. The way they all smile. Effortlessly, unabashedly, like nothing could touch them. Even better– when they approach, space opens up in the circle for the two of them to slide in,

side by side.

“-at like, 8:00-ish? How’s that sound?” One of the guys– one of Cameron’s frat-brothers, says. Cameron raises an eyebrow in silent question. “Movie night. All of us. A couple beers, pizza, and a horror movie?”

“I don’t do horror,” Cameron says, grimacing.

“Now you do,” Greyson smirks, remembering the last time they saw a movie together. “You think that Sally thing is gonna come out and kill you?”

“Shut the hell up,” Cameron jostles him, making Greyson snicker.

“Dingus is invited to,” the friend says, nodding at Greyson. “Ro is bringing Luca…”

“Is he now?” Greyson says, looking to his best friend with a small smirk. Rowan shakes his head with a pathetic smile. “We’re in.”

“No, we’re not,” Cameron murmurs in his ear. “I don’t do-”

“Suffer,” Greyson says back with a mischievous grin. “We’ll be there.”

“Better be. You only just got let in. Don’t make us regret it,” the friend says with a chuckle as Cameron drags Greyson away. “See you tonight!”

“I hate you,” Cameron mumbles as Greyson falls into line with him and stumbles to Cameron’s car in the parking lot. “I miss when my friends hated you.”

“No you don’t.”

“No, I don’t,” Cameron gave in easily. It was too hard of a lie to tell. He doesn’t miss any of it– not one bit. He doesn’t miss the fear, and the loneliness, and the seclusion of it all, and he doesn’t miss hating his best friend’s best friend, either.

Cameron drove them to Greyson’s dorm so he could have whatever things he might want to stay the night with. They shuffle through the hall with laughs and bumping into one another for the hell of it– Cameron playfully shoved his partner by the shoulder, only for Greyson to grab his hand and tug him along. They giggle and snicker all the way to the dorm, where Greyson let them in.

“I feel like every time I walk into your room, I’m walking into a quarantine zone,” Cameron says as a half joke. He’s still scared to sit on any of the surfaces right now.

“It’s not my fault you’ve never seen a clean bedroom before,” Greyson rolls his eyes. “If we ever live together, you’re gonna have to change your cleaning habits. No more dishes on the desk for a week.”

“ *If* we ever live together,” Cameron snickers, inching closer to Greyson and resting his hand on Greyson’s lower back. “You planning to leave me?”

“If you don’t get your shit together, maybe,” Greyson lies, smirking to himself as he folds a shirt, a pair of pants, and a hoodie into a backpack, alongside his toothbrush, toothpaste, and a bottle of hand sanitizer. “I’m kidding.”

“I know,” Cameron murmurs, leaning down and kissing his neck. “You’ve done really good, trying to break some of those habits.”

“I’m trying,” Greyson’s smile falters slightly. These conversations can be hard sometimes. The serious ones. The ones that will affect their future, and their possibility of one. Unpacking all of that which has already been broken down in therapy a dozen times. One day, Greyson might invite Cameron to a session, just to sit in.

“I am too,” Cameron whispers, making his partner’s smile come right back. Greyson wraps his arms around Cameron’s, which interlocked around his waist, and he takes a deep breath. “You sure everything’s good with your mom?”

“Don’t start,” Greyson laughs and breaks away, going over to his bedside table and grabbing a phone charger and digging through his bedside drawer, pulling out his wallet. “Can we stop at the store and get that candy you like?”

“You mean that candy *you* like, and I eat because it’s in front of me?”

“Precisely,” Greyson turns around and jumps at the sight of his friend in the doorway, a bag slung over his shoulder and looking aghast. “…Santiago.”

“Greyson,” Santiago eyes the two of them nervously. “Did I… interrupt?”

“No,” Greyson stood up straighter and smiled. “Welcome back. Movie

night at the frat, you wanna come? Luca is going too."

"At the frat?" Santiago repeats. "How long was winter break?"

Greyson looks at Cameron, sharing a small smile.

"We'll catch up in the car," Cameron offers. "You want any candy for the movie?"

Greyson has never sat on the couch in Delta Phi. Until today, that is.

There is plenty of seating. Two couches, a loveseat, an arm chair, and some beanbags scattered on the floor. Luca and Rowan started off sitting on the loveseat on two separate cushions, but with each jumpscare, Luca would flinch into Rowan, and Rowan would bury them both under a blanket for cover. Santiago sat on the floor in a beanbag making rather interesting conversation with Sam, who was dissecting the exact videographics needed to accomplish the scenery compiled for the movie. A handful of the other guys invited their other friends and partners, meaning the living room was bursting at the seams with a movie-theater's worth of people.

Cameron and Greyson started sitting side by side against the arm of the couch, which slowly turned into Cameron hiding in Greyson's bicep and whispering " *tell me when it's over* " for approximately two and a half hours straight. Greyson had to admit– it was cute.

"That was…" one of the boys said slowly as the credits began to roll. "Horrific."

"Awful," Cameron murmured, still not convinced it was safe enough to emerge from his cocoon of blankets and Greyson's limbs. "Never again. Never."

"Can we put on something nice now? And less… jump-scare-y?" Sam asks with a meek voice.

"That was kinda epic, you have to admit," Greyson says, drawing lazy shapes on Cameron's back. They all gawk at him like he was insane. "Fine. Play something nice."

"Toy Story!"

Someone lunges for the remote to put on some movie from Disney. Half the guys downstairs take it as their cue to exit to their rooms

when they're feeling brave enough to go up the dark stairs and into their dark bedrooms. Some of them go get more popcorn or beers. Sam offers Greyson another drink, which he accepts gratefully, swigging the drink before resting it on the table behind him. His fingers return to tracing along his partner's body– cold fingertips running over Cameron's neck, through his hair, over his spine. Loving touches.

"How long has this been a thing?" Santiago says through a mouthful of MnM's.

"Good question," Rowan scoffs from his spot. Luca was asleep on his shoulder. "Go on, man. Tell 'em."

"Uh," Greyson let his head fall back, hoping Cameron would jump in and help him. He doesn't. "Before Thanksgiving. We made it official during Thanksgiving break."

"...It's February," Santiago states. "It's February and you told me today ."

"I didn't tell you," Greyson says. "To be fair, we didn't tell anybody. People just… found out. Some of whom beat us up. Others who beat up the people who beat us up."

"You're welcome," Sam smirks, holding a hand up to high five. Greyson only hesitates for a moment. He's already sitting on the man's couch.

"You guys are the worst. You didn't tell us?" Santiago huffs. "I was in the dark for that long?"

"We didn't know it would work!" Greyson defended. Cameron stirs slightly, and Greyson suddenly realized he was asleep. "Sorry."

Cameron hummed contently and closed his eyes again, head falling into Greyson's chest. Greyson could sit there forever without a complaint in the world. He thinks he might just do that.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter before we say goodbye :,)

Its the end of an era. I'm not sure how long some of you have been around, but I often have two fics running at the same time— Stars Stripes and Aristocratic Snobs vs When, Read Between the

Lines vs Speak of the Devil, and now Temptare Tormentis et Triumphi and Nepotism, Baby! Saying goodbye to this one just reminded me we're through yet another year.

One last chapter. An epilogue of sorts. I've enjoyed being on this journey with you, and I hope you've enjoyed it too.

Until next time o7
Hayl (@ hayloftown on twitter)

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Closing of the chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greyson blew out his knee in a volleyball game as a teenager— about two years after Dad died. He was in the hospital for a week, which was about as pleasant as it sounds after losing your father and spending the majority of your life taking him to doctors appointments.

It was the same hospital Dad died at. Mum cried the entire week. Greyson had surgery to repair the blown tendons and dislocation. He was told to never dare to step foot on a volleyball court again. It wasn't much trouble— his mother would never let him take so much as a step without her permission again.

That is, of course, until he went to college. He could only be controlled for so long. His first act of rebellion was joining the club sport for Brown University. They didn't do tournaments. They just played one another once a week, sometimes on weekends for fun. Nothing overly competitive. Nothing terrible.

Sometimes, it still bothers him. The knee. His mother. The hospital his Dad died at. But that's okay, he thinks. The memories keep him alive.

He's not sure whose brilliant idea it was to sit Cameron's family beside Greyson's. It sounded like a sure-fire way for their afternoon to turn sour. In the intermissions, there's quiet chatter amongst the crowd, where Greyson's mother and Cameron's parents talk a little too much, where Cameron's sisters bother Greyson's brother, where Greyson's sister looks around wondering if this could be her future, too. Breaking the mold. Bring something bigger than anyone expected.

Then, he steps up.

There's a roar of applause. There's a simultaneous excitement that fills the air. Their families pitch forward in their seats like they were about to watch the most riveting game of their lives.

There is a soft crack of his knuckles, and a careful breath. In, and out. One glance up, then over, then down again.

In a slow trickle, Cameron dances his fingers across the piano keys. Greyson melts into his seat just as he does every time he watches his boyfriend play. Just as he does every time he gets to hear witness to such perfection.

He looks beautiful on the stage— dawned in his black cap and gown, his cords draped across his neck like badges of honor, layered with several stolls. He was one of the most accomplished students of their graduating class. He turned down speaking— he would rather play. He's always been the performer. He only just learned how to embrace it.

Cameron plays the piano like he was in love with it. A delicate caress of each keystroke, afraid to hurt the precious instrument that he cared for so dearly. Greyson sat forward against his knees, smiling to himself, anxiously awaiting to embrace Cameron once more at the end.

Cameron leans into his rendition of Nuvole Bianche, but it wasn't entirely perfect to the song— he takes creative liberties in the bridges between tones, throwing in chords that resonate deeper, hitting keys and holding notes until Greyson feels close to tears. Cameron steals a glance up, and as if he was looking for Greyson, they made eye contact.

They both smile.

As they will every day, for the rest of their lives, they smile.

Cameron is met with a storming applause as he steps away from the piano after a five minute song— the entirety of Brown University hollering after their star athlete, their representation, their loved one. Cameron gave a polite bow and a smile, waving before stepping down to rejoin his seat— right at Greyson's side.

Greyson hands his call-card back as Cameron slid into the seat beside him, leaning over and pressing a kiss to his jaw.

"That was beautiful," Greyson whispers. "You blew us all away."

"I have more where that came from," Cameron murmurs back, leaning down and stealing a proper kiss. "You should've seen your face. Drooling over a pianist?"

“You have nice hands…” Greyson flickers his attention over his partner, reaching over and taking his hand. He thumbed at each of Cameron’s fingers that drip with talent. With his spare hand, he reaches out and fixes the cords and stoles to lay flat, admiring each and every one. Cords and stoles alike for his fraternity involvement, a stole for his academic prowess, a cord for his philanthropic efforts, a rainbow cord for being involved in the Gender and Sexuality Center (a new hobby of his), and of course, the Brown University stole.

Greyson sat back, leaning into his partner’s arm, and thought the same thing he’s thought for the past year and a half of dating Cameron: he could die tomorrow, and he would die happy. Life couldn’t be too short when it was filled with such good. It would be selfish to ask for anything more than the perfection he has now.

They listen to their class speaker, their commencement speaker, their university president and their deans— none of their words mattered. Greyson and Cameron were soaking the minutes together, knowing they would do this forever. They would grow old together, or die young together— it didn’t really matter. So long as they were together. Through rain or snow, sun or clouds, a good day could never be too far.

Greyson could easily complain about the lack of organization in the graduation event. He could complain about how there was no graduation practice, or any order to seating, or the weird call-card system they had in order to walk across the stage. He could complain about being too close with strangers (though, with Cameron, Rowan, Santiago and Luca all sitting by him, it wasn’t much of an issue), and he could complain about shaking hands with people who shook hands with every person before him.

Instead, he handed his call-card over to the person at the podium. She glanced at his name momentarily, as if reassuring herself in the pronunciation, before reading out loud—

“Greyson Gregory Hampton!”

He thinks of his dad as he crosses the stage. Thinks about heaven and the afterlife. Thinks about what Dad would have done to see this moment— see his second son, his youngest boy, graduate from college.

By the time he’s descending the stage, being ushered toward a photographer, another name is called-

“Cameron Alexander Cunningham!”

Greyson looks over his shoulder just in time to watch his partner brush a tear from his eye and cross the stage. Someone is trying to make Greyson move on, but he refuses. He wouldn’t do this alone.

Cameron accepts his fake diploma— its just a folder with a note that pretty much says “IOU 1 Degree”. He goes to descend the stairs and caught Greyson’s eyes, instantly lighting up with nothing but joy. Greyson tackles him in a hug, both laughing incredulously, crying ridiculously, and listening the next name—

“Rowan Wade Harrison!”

Greyson kisses his partner— there's a flash from somewhere behind him that he doesn’t notice— and he pulls away to grab his best friend into a hug, too.

“Don’t kiss me,” Rowan snickers as he holds right back. “We did it.”

“We did it.”

Years together. Four of them, to be precise. A friendship unmatched. A partnership that grew. A quintuplet of a friend group that was completely and utterly inseparable. In the four years of college, they lived a lifetime. In the one year of being together, Cameron and Greyson wanted a lifetime more.

After the ceremony, their families find them– Greyson’s mother swung him into the biggest hug she could muster, sobbing into his shoulder, whispering her pride. Greyson held on just as tight, eyes shut tight and trying to imagine his father being here, too. Something tells him Dad wasn’t too far.

Wesley and Phoebe join in on the hug. Greyson picked up his little sister and held on for dear life. He wanted this moment for so long.

If he looked over his shoulder, he would see Cameron in a tight embrace with his father.

Over the past year, their relationship had been tense. Cameron actually didn’t go home for the holidays this year under the guise of “working on stuff”-- Greyson and Cameron spent the holidays together in the otherwise empty dorms, celebrating the holidays alone. Cameron had spoken with his father on a weekly basis. His sisters and mother more. Every conversation was tense– Cameron would hunt

down his partner to vent out every word of their arguments and uncomfortable talks, arguing about how stupid it all was.

Greyson watches, though, and he smiles, because his boyfriend is smiling. Cameron's father is holding his shoulders, beaming down at his son, saying a million things that make Cameron look like a little kid on Christmas– Cameron has never looked happier.

Greyson broke away from his family to slide over toward Cameron again. Cameron's mother hugged Greyson (which wasn't entirely comfortable, but Greyson accepted it anyways). Cameron's sisters offered their congratulations. Cameron's father grinned at Greyson, too.

"Congratulations, son," Colton stuck his hand out for a shake. Greyson takes it. "Proud of you. Both of you."

"Thank you, sir," Greyson says, looking up at his partner. "I, uh.. I need to introduce you to-"

"Is this the boy?!" Mum demands, wiggling in. "Are you him?"

"Mum," Greyson grimaces. "This is my boyfriend. Cameron, my Mum."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am-"

"Get in here!"

Greyson watches in amazement as his panicked mother pulls Cameron, a total stranger, into a hug. She's saying something in Cameron's ear as she held him, and Cameron nods with a soft smile– murmuring something back.

It's a beautiful moment– watching all his loved ones, all his future, collide into one explosion of warmth and love. Families that would have otherwise never met. People who would have gone their entire lives without knowing the other existed. The fate of it all astonished Greyson.

The closing of one chapter, the beginning of the next.

Cameron and Greyson don't spend long celebrating their graduation– that's what the week leading up to graduation was. They did all the dinners with their families individually. They spent time together plenty. After– that was all them.

Greyson and Cameron stripped themselves of their robes and stoles, they tossed their decorated caps into the backseat of Cameron's car, and when they sat in the front seats, they met with a soft kiss in the middle. It was everything to them– that first breath of freedom, of adulthood. They made it, together.

Cameron starts his car and plugs in his phone. Greyson gets to play DJ. He instinctively sunk down into his seat, takes Cameron's hand, and smiles as the car gets thrown in drive.

"Where to?" Cameron asks in a whisper, thumbing at Greyson's knuckles. "I was thinking Michigan…"

"Can we see the Grand Canyon?"

"That's Arizona," Cameron laughs, but nods. "Whatever you want."

They don't need directions. They don't need hotels, or signs for the next rest stop, or anything else. They have each other, some packed bags in the backseat, and the wide open road. They were off to explore the world in front of them, without fear. Maybe play a couple rounds of pool on the journey.

It didn't matter where they ended up. It was about the drive. It was about them. From now on, all about them.

Chapter End Notes

And that was Speak of the Devil (and He Shall Rise).

The end.

It's been a wild ride. I am endlessly appreciative of you all. As of right now, this is my most popular fic, which is absolutely wild to consider. The attention and love on these silly little words has been so fun to work with.

If you weren't already, PLEASE follow my twitter @ hayloftown, where I post weird things and tell you about other writing projects. Among them includes a novel I published just this week. Maybe check it out ;)

Until I see you all again...
Hayl o7

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!